

Painted, spoken

edited by Richard Price

number 31

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S e r g e j T i m o f e j e v

Four poems from *Various Things*

translated from the Russian by Anne Gutt

* * *

The saxophonist will play the mournful note
as if it's not enough for him that it's already autumn
and in the audience, mostly, everyone's around fifty,
and the last bus left five minutes ago,
and now you need to fork out for a taxi,
and after all with this money you could have bought a bottle
or even two and drunk it down, watching through the window,
as the neighbourhood cats lick each other clean under
the iron awning which is completely decrepit,
eaten up by rust and the indifference of the house manager,
who is not without his own worries, all kinds of non-payment,
shortages, failures, and whether there's anything here worth
restoring, maybe we should move
the whole house onto the next street, where, so they say,
it's still summer and the sun is dancing in the dust completely
shamelessly for as little as three centimes.

* * *

6 o'clock in the evening
what will we do with this evening
develop it in a cafe
soak it in different sorts of tea
until an image appears
of a skinny little vase, a sugar-bowl and a bit of the wall
or we'll knead it in dough
and model figurines of a little boy, a little girl
and a dog, then cover them with chocolate glaze
and hide them between the spice biscuits
no, instead let's lull this evening
to sleep in our laps
let it turn into night unnoticed
and fall asleep between you and me
with half-open mouth, outstretched
between two pillows
an evening that didn't become anything
especially outstanding
just evening

1982

Working as an apprentice, it's hard not to wish
for previous times. Leonid Ilyich Prevzhnev,
where are your hoary words? You laid them out
on the lectern, like an old woman
laying out small change from a purse. And
you quietly shook your eyebrows, like an autumn grove.
News of your departure struck us down
in the drawing lesson, where we painstakingly
depicted the charm of the autumn leaf fall.
And for a long time the excruciating schoolmistress
crumbled the chalk, crushing it against the board,
in order to write a straightforward solution
for all to get out.

Romance

At that time I had a cold,
I came over to your household,
I couldn't let slip such a chance
Like the dream island of Sancho Panza.
And you were cutting down branches
Standing on a stool,
And some thin noisy kids out of school
Screwed sweet wrappers into little rolls
And pushed them through the keyhole.
I wrapped myself in a long scarf
And the end knocked over the carafe
of water and there were all sorts of gaucheries,
And I was embarrassed, like when they said to me
In the seventh grade at school
"Here's the chalk, you've learnt the grammar rules?"
Then we sat at the table decorously
You spilt the salt as you poured out tea,
And the windows seemed to turn away from us,
Delicately, barely noticeably, turned away from us.
Oh, why, why does a throat exhale
And a voice sing, but an ear doesn't hear at all,
Why is this birthmark disregarded,
And your hand sincere, misguided?
I set out all these questions
Like the light at the end of a cigarette's confession
And there are never and nowhere solutions
To such complex, beneath-the-skin questions.

Margaret Tait and Hazel Frew

Sketches of Poets by Richard Price

Margaret Tait (1818-1999) was a film-maker and poet. She qualified as a doctor in 1941, going on to practice as a GP. She studied film-making at Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in the early 1950s, returning to Edinburgh after that, co-founding Ancona Films (which issued her usually short films) and publishing short stories and poetry, collecting these in self-published books with high production values such as *Origins and Elements* (1959) and *Subjects and Sequences* (1960). She is one of the few auteur film-makers of the period in the UK.

Her poems are unusual for their time in formal and subject terms. They are free in the sense that they are not made of traditional structures like sonnets or ballads, but they do sometimes deploy rhyme in a jazz-like syncopation with varying line lengths and seeming improvisation, not unlike Ford Madox Ford in "Starlings". The free poetry of D H Lawrence and his rhetorical rhythms seem to have been an influence (in one poem, "Secrets", Tait takes the Lawrence of his poem "Figs" to task for his views of women, how they, he believes, should hide themselves for the protection of what is most valuable in woman-ness). Unusual I believe for the time, Tait's poems are tonally conversational, sometimes as if thinking aloud on topics of the day (the science and poetry of water in 'H2O', the coming of nuclear power in 'Dounreay').

In the poem "Me" (*Poems, Stories and Writings*, pp120-121) the work is gently and then anxiously confessional (in discussing the "I" in Tait's poetry I take short-cut by personalising it as "Tait", but write here that I in fact never forget there is a profound difference between the speaking I of the poem and the poet herself). The 'confession' – the poet's childlessness – is placed within a wider, almost sociological sense of purpose while at the same time expressing, and trying to cope with, great personal troubling. There is a strong suggestion in the poem that not having children is because of infertility rather than choice:

The germs plasm continues
While neighbours come and go.
In me no, though.
In me it came to a stop.
Sometimes it comes to a stop.

[...]

Oh, how can I know if what I do with all this me
That there is is what I was meant to do?
How can I know?
I can't know
All that I may have devoted to my children
Is devoted outwardly, oh, to everybody,
And inwardly, to me, to know me, know myself so
Far as I can tell about myself.

In the first lines quoted the velocity of changing scope is breathtaking – the reader is rapidly taken from the magnification of “the germ plasm” (a seed? a fertilised egg?, something more generalised such as the life impulse?), seen, as it were, in the thought-microscope, to the casual observation of neighbours, ‘coming and going’ in two senses: firstly, going on about their everyday business around Tait’s private anguish and, secondly, representing a transient, ‘horizontal’, form of human life (neighbours having no successiveness) contrasted with the longterm, the ‘vertical’ direction of life that the continuity of procreation offers, where there is succession. Finally, Tait seems to look up from this her analytical work and confides directly in her reader, trying to be philosophical about her situation: “In me no, though./In me it came to a stop./ Sometimes it comes to a stop.”

We know from the later lines quoted that Tait can see the argument that her creativity, which she suggests would have been focussed on her children if she and her partner had been able to have children, is not wasted because it is redirected for a wider purpose. With this keenly social, humanistic drive, this is a development from the old Shakespearean trope of art supplying the ‘immortality’ merely to the writer and their beloved. We also know,

however, that Tait is not convinced by that rationale, however consoling a suggestion it might be. Rather, despite the tone of resignation earlier in the poem, this represents profoundly unsettling territory for Tait. Fascinatingly, this also leads her, in that casual near-soliloquy at the end of the quoted section, to question her ability (or anyone's ability) to know oneself. From the biological essentialism of women as mothers or potential mothers, Tait therefore moves, with a variety of rhythms and line-lengths (as if tracking the changing intensities of her thoughts), to a much more mercurial, unknowable state of being.

The poem does move on, however – it is a characteristic of this style in Tait's poetry that there are mood shifts and a variety of different micro-registers contained within the over-framing essentially conversational register. The conclusion of the poem is, really, a good-humoured piece of self-deprecation, neatly though lightly incorporating a suggestion that female traditions can be malign as well as benign: Tait suggests that in any case a wicked fairy godmother (in a reference I guess to the wicked fairy that curses Sleeping Beauty) must have been there at her birth.

Hazel Frew's poems also have a conversational directness and, like Tait, there is a strong observational eye which can lead the poem in unexpected directions. Frew was born in 1968, grew up in Broughty Ferry on the east coast of Scotland and graduated from Glasgow University in 1991. On the face of it, her work has barely been published in Scotland at all (like others in her situation, the own-country obsession of any given country's apparatus of poetry reception – unless you are an American author – means this is likely to give her work very little exposure outside of Scotland, and very little inside). Rack Press, twin homes in London and north Wales, published her debut pamphlet *Clockwork Scorpion* in 2007, with the English press Shearsman publishing her first, and to date, only 'full-length' collection *Seahorses* in 2008 (Rack have subsequently published another pamphlet, *Minim*, 2014); like Tait in her lifetime her work has received very little attention reviews-wise. Her poems have, however, been published in magazines in Scotland, such as *Fras* and *Poetry Scotland* and in the annual volume *New Writing Scotland*,

and the crucial 'softer' parts of the Scottish creative infrastructure have also been important to Frew: in particular, the friendship with the late Alexander Hutchison, a poet she has acknowledged as a profoundly important mentor to her, and the poetry scene in her adopted Glasgow, including the reading series St Mungo's Mirror Ball.

Her poem "Blister" (*Seahorses*, p.43) is a good example of her stripped-down style. It captures a tense conversation between the speaker (the convention of course is to assume this is the poet herself, if only for emotional engagement) and her boyfriend, who in this depiction is clearly far from a class act. The poem begins with a very economical two lines, "Teal silk / to show you up", suggesting a stylish if wilful, pointed, dressing-up. This is swiftly rebuked by boyfriend with a weary sneer in the next two lines: "Have you been / to Chinatown, you sigh?"

This is a relationship winding irritably down to its end, with the speaker of the poem reflecting on just how much she would have given up, at one time, for her lover: "To think I was willing / to be a pod."

Like Tait, Frew acknowledges a potential biological reality in the nature of women, potential reproductive power, while also holding the thought of it at armslength, in Frew's case with that word "pod".

There is something in that use of the word which is appalled by the thought of subsuming oneself to a mere biological container; perhaps inevitably I think of the film series *Alien*. At the same time, the *self*-alienation inherent in the process of pregnancy is also a measure of love, of sacrifice, for the boyfriend as well as the being-to-be, a feeling now clearly gone. Rather than pregnancy there are now other kinds of encasement – smaller-scale, though, the pettiness of the boyfriend's sour behaviour, the sullen irritation of a blister. A blister is a minor mockery of a pregnancy in a way, 'giving birth', as the poem comes to its tense laden conclusion, only to toxins and antibodies: "Blister / not bliss. // A friction of silence / ruining the night."

R o b i n F u l t o n M a c p h e r s o n

A New Day

Dawn was a cramped shadowy room.
I stumbled in with unwieldy baskets
full of the night's dream-detritus.

A voice that sounded like my own
mumbled to me from the inmost corner
"Don't bring your bedlam-baskets here."

A pigeon on someone's roof moaned
"Nowhere to put them, nowhere to put them,
you'd better go back to the dark."

The Shortest Day

Low cloud makes sure: there are no hills,
trees that once wanted to be tall
have had to stop growing half-way,
the dawn tried to happen but failed.

We are discouraged from thinking
that something like a universe
is making and breaking its rules
about time, somewhere, and shining.

A Thin Burn

The dead have a bad habit
of giving me wrong answers
to questions I haven't asked.

The questions I want to ask
swirl like crows that can't settle
for the night, not there, not yet.

A thin burn percolating
from wide heathery nowhere
gives an impression of speech.

"Never mind the dead," it says.
But next time I hear Murdo
make the world sound like Caithness

the burn has nothing to say
that doesn't sound like water,
water and only water.

Remote

It has stayed in the same place and followed me for sixty-five years, something remote lochs are good at.

Seen online, nowhere is remote. Here is the hour-by-hour forecast for Loch Arichlinie today:

breeze gentle, rain none. Nobody will notice the miniature waves noticing the gentleness of the breeze.

Family Gravestones

“Occasional mild spells but mostly below average temperatures, with rain.”

If only they were as familiar as old-fashioned mantelpieces, tiles keeping warmth alive, and not a touch of the loneliness of the universe.

Fiona Wilson

Site

"The place or position occupied by some specified thing." OED

The toy houses, outbuildings perched / say, evidence of
a big green sky / color of what / bright copper turned flat
or dream-fields / walled and tumbled, stroked with a fork
wrought / into rags and runs / say little hills of black plastic
or rusting machinery / which is hemlock / or other ruined cogs
or things / and always the hawthorn / bent to a fault, and beneath it
the hare / her long ears back / beneath the earth's grass shelter

Lovelly

One night in a thousand,
glamorous, exceptional,
a heat-

seeking missile
in flowering hibiscus—
her jet-set-style maxi—

she unbent to kiss me
in fireworks so
lovelly I can't

even spell it
why this, and this,
not that, or any other—

P e t e r M c C a r e y

f r o m T h e S y l l a b a r y

16.2.2

It's not so much
The phonic net
As the nothing it's
Anchored to that shows
The shores and shoals
Of communication

16.2.11

You dreamt of a seal
On a crocodile's back
Quite happy, swimming
Down the river.

What did they have
In common? – Both
Amphibians. It
Showed the old ideal

As a dream shored up
With a shoulder to cry on.
A seal on a crocodile's back
Is a wife that relies on a husband.

13.2.11

The sower sowed his neatly stored
Instructions for the fall.
A scold stowed some in sutras.
The sower strode and sang, then,
ROTAS OPERA TENET AREPO SATOR
The sad scold understood
Ten potatoes pose a rare tort.
He scowled. And soldiered on. The black
Birds of the airways soared and strolled
In clover. Who sold the sower?
It snowed grain. Time
Slowed to the speed of
Stoned crows. Under his feet
The sutured runrig scrolled.

14.3.10

Jot on vellum
Japped with sense
The joist and joint of drum frame,
Jaunt of muscle.

14.2.10

My good friends joked
And jolt like puppets.

14.1.10 **Jute**

All I do
Is repossess the wordage
And let you.

If you're not there?
If this
Is spoken for?

If everyone
Wants decoration and utility
I'm on the dump.

For this is where the jute
Comes through the lino –
Matted hair;

I've nothing to say you don't
Know already.

H a z e l F r e w

MILKY

Milky post-Soviet
a skin to dock in

lily white hand
friesian
soft as burrata

translucence Plath
her misty portrait,
masculine neck

she may feel that itch
like Marilyn
the hitch,
in the dim

hunter dance
one chance to slip
frippet, spin, come in.

TERN

The arctic tern must fly
I must navigate this frozen lake.

I am the little girl who skates
I am the small girl with mummy
dancing on brittle candy
sliding on brute steel
holding hands, skating in and out
the imagined rink,
your breath suspended like a halo.

The abacus beads shot as a child
a dream of suspended animation
shoom, shoom, shoom on taut wire
you on your end, grandmother on the other, mouths
agog.

I must, must have you alive.
I watch you on the ice, the white out
as your Pretty Polly self dies like a match.

The ice is cracking, the thaw begins,
at the crust, sensing flood
pickaxing grief, confetti knife.

The arctic tern must fly,
I must navigate melting.

BREATHBONE

for Alexander Hutchison

What was it like to be you
beak high
mind to eye
a javelin point?

Picking out, joining up
fast diving
gavia stellata.

We sat by the money-tree fat thumbs
spoon jade, squarely.

In the poet's garden
becoming a wisp

bird-tender skin
soft lids
your solid breath
evaporating.

R a l p h H a w k i n s

swat team

the fly finds a hole in the soul
and off it goes

but do you want to be a fly

the soul is another matter, if matter

poetry seems to find itself
transported to such heartfelt places

thought itself, for example

whilst the fly would never know
(who knows)
its place in the ecological system

or that commas are baby tadpoles
that begin as full stops

the joy of living

xxi/v/18.i.m.

clouds

the bare minimum

a bee in a woolly jumper
bombus lapidaries

two blackbirds
the younger receiving lessons on birdfeeders
& *all along the shoreline an oyster-catcher*
pays credence to our tremblings

the sound of tapping,
cars passing

a leap in circumstance

totally self-conscious

I stopped for a second,
seeing him
and rehearsing his voice
on the phone

Greek Flowers

for Kelvin Corcoran

Narthex

Narthex or the giant fennel, thick stemmed and hollow
was used by Prometheus as a container to bring fire to man

with its yellow umbels of clustered flowers and large frond leaves
narthex staffs, twined with ivy and vine
tipped with pine-cone to form a thyrsus

this was the choice of weapon for Satyrs and Maenads
an orgiastic bunch, perhaps wearing masks and tattoos
with little else
they raved along the mountainside
ripping calves to pieces

a man dressed in a goat-coat was their lover

Asphodel

in petaled whorls, that *greeny flower*, he says, like a daisy
star-clustered on the banks of the Acheron

Williams recalling Homer's *Odyssey*

an old man's thoughts

passing the gates of the sun and the home of dreams
they came to a field of asphodel

forced no doubt to contemplate his own dying spark

Blake's picture of the befrocked souls flowerless
has their heads plagued by fat hornets
and their feet by snakeworms

it was planted on grave sites

it stands on warm hillsides
brittle in the wind with its regal stems

a man waiting with a boat

Biographical Poem

old age and illness
give me little time
and what do I do
with time as it comes
I can't disregard it
I write a poem
and when complete
like the old
it is without
interest
a thing of disregard to
most everyone
real poets will
be pained by its
lack of relevance
of no significance
they will dislike
the dull plainness of
its words
its lack of humour
and ambiguity
but there is one
somewhere
some distance
and miles from here
who will hear it
maybe they too
will understand the cruel
banishment
of this life

S a p p h o

translated by Richard Price

Love, body melter, again, again
explodes in –
animal, bittersweet, No
defence system

can save me

Robin Fulton Macpherson's *Northern Habitat: Collected Poems 1960-2010* is published by Marick Press.

Hazel Frew's first collection was published by Shearsman Books in 2008. She has two pamphlets published by Rack Press, *Clockwork Scorpion* (2007) and *Minim* (2014).

Anne Gutt is an artist and translator. She was awarded the Gabo Prize for Literary Translation Summer/Fall 2017 for her translations of poems by Ganna Shevchenko. She has also published translations of Nina Iskrenko's poetry.

Ralph Hawkins is the author of *Tell Me No More and Tell Me* (Grosseteste 1981), *At Last Away* (Gallop Dog Press, 1988), *Gone to Marzipan* (Oystercatcher, 2009) and *It Looks Like An Island But Sails Away* (Shearsman, 2015)

Peter McCarey is the author of the study *MacDiarmid and the Russians* and many poetry collections, including *Collected Contraptions* (Carcanet). His collection of essays on poetry, *Find an Angel and Pick a Fight* is published by Molecular Press, as is *Petrushka*, a hybrid novel (or is it?) about a shocking kind of hybridisation. He lives in Geneva.

Richard Price's latest collection is *Moon for Sale* (Carcanet). He has also recently produced *Digital* an artist's book from Julie Johnstone's essence press. With Roberto Sainz de La Maza and Elisa de Leon he forms the band The Loss Adjustors.

Sergej Timofejev (born 1971, Riga) is a Latvian poet writing in Russian. He is a founder member of the Orbita Group, which has participants active in literature, visual art, music, film and performance. The Orbita Group publish bilingual Russian and Latvian editions. These are poems from Riga, from a Latvian and European sensibility. Timofejev is the author of seven books of poetry (four published in Riga and three in St. Petersburg and Moscow). He has approved these translations and has given permission for them to be published.

Fiona Wilson is the author of *A Clearance* (The Sheep Meadow Press, 2015). Her poetry has appeared in numerous journals and in several anthologies on both sides of the Atlantic. She grew up in Scotland and lives in New York City. She teaches literature at Sarah Lawrence College.

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Sappho, trans. Richard Price

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