

Women poets don't need muses. Just contraception

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reviews
NEW POETRY

Salt water is ambiguous stuff. It leaks out of the eyes as tears; oceans of it lap the whole world. It is both the source of life and a means of mourning the end of life. Andrew Motion's new collection, *Salt Water* (Faber £7.99, pp112) is rich with such ambiguities. In the long opening poem, 'Fresh Water', the young poet hunts the source of the Thames: 'A red-brown soft-lipped cleft/with bright green grass right up to the edge/and the water twisting out like a rope of glass.' Time passes. Now the poet is in his forties, downstream, and the river is a great sullied creature, loaded with junk. This poem is alive with joy and sadness. There is the bliss of being connected, of having a wife and children, of standing with them to look at the 'whole dazzling cross-hatchery of traffic and currents'. And then there appears the body of a friend drowned on the Marchioness, with her 'red velvet party dress/flickering around her heels'. All through the book such images jostle. It is not a comfortable collection in its explorations of grief, loss and dispersal, but this is Motion's boldest, most adventurous poetry yet. The second half of *Salt Water* is a prose journal, 'Sailing to Italy'. This records the voyage in which Motion followed Keats's dying journey from London to Naples, as research for his forthcoming biography. This prose piece suggests that the biography will be exceptional; in conjunction with the new poems it also shows that the encounter with Keats has been a kindling, liberating one for Motion.

Liberation and enclosure are powerful themes in Menna Elfyn's work. She is a political poet, writing with passion of the Welsh language and identity for which she campaigns. But she makes her claims with realism: 'Don't pity me/I'm no Pasternak/nor Mandelstam./I could buy my way out of here,/three hours and I'd be home.' (No. 257863 H.M.P.) Elfyn writes in Welsh, and the poems in *Cell Angel* (Bloodaxe Books £7.95, pp112) are translated by four other poets. They capture a restless, intensely responsive imagination, and a directness among the richness of her imagery. Like all translators, these wrestle with a slippery substance that won't always survive out of its own element. Some of these English versions are caught in a linguistic halfway house, the home of that strange language, translatoresque. Others work extremely well. Notably, Elin ap Hywel and Gillian Clarke make a sensuous, vibrant and witty version of the sequence 'The Theology of Hair'.

Robin Robertson catches the tension of moving between two languages in his poem 'The Translator':

He will go west/and west again
striking out on his own
in open water.
Sewing the surface,
one quarter man
three quarters verb,
fitting his turbulence
to the undertow.

This is Robertson on form: pithy, intelligent and compressed. *A Painted Field* (Picador £6.99, pp93) is his first collection,

and as such is remarkably controlled and self-aware. Perhaps there are losses in this as well as gains: perhaps a first collection of poems ought to be uneven, to exceed its own limits in fitful brilliance, to brandish poems which will make the poet wince, 10 years on. Scotland, Robertson's birthplace, is the imaginative homeland of the best poems here. 'Visiting my Grandfather' begins quietly enough, among 'brown bakelite, teak,/and felt for furnishing' but it ends in the drama of the child discovering a pheasant by touch, as it hangs on the back of a door. Robertson's lines keep pace with the rapid plunges of a child's guesswork: 'I came against/a womanly thing,/some kind of shawl/or handbag dressed in feathers.'

An upbringing in remarkable places, among remarkable people, is the source for Michael Schmidt's sequence 'The Love of Strangers', which is now included in his *Selected Poems 1972-1997* (Smith/Doorstop Books £7.95, pp96). Schmidt was born and brought up in Mexico. The finding of his own childhood letters to his father, beginning 'Dear Papacito', but written from exile in education 4,000 miles away, is a typically rich subject. Schmidt is always a stringent poet, never shy of painful truth. One of the most touching poems here shows the child at 12 inventing a desire to learn Nahuatl, and being found out at his first and only meeting with the philologist Angel María Garibay.

Miroslav Valek, who died in 1991, was a Slovak Minister of Culture. It is impossible to imagine a comparable British politician writing such poems so doubtful of received truths, so world-weary yet so much in love with odd moments of existence:

Hurry - at the corner
the evening's already blowing its horn,
painted blue like an ancient motorcar,
the urban sun, a scratchy played-out record,
is slipping below the horizon...

Even more than usual with translated poetry, Valek's poetry - *The Ground Beneath Our Feet: Selected Poems*, translated by Ewald Osers (Modry Peter/Bloodaxe Books £6.95, pp63) leaves an impression of hidden things which will never quite come to the surface in English. It takes a painful history and the 'tragic circumstances' to which Miroslav Holub alludes in his foreword, for language and politics to be locked into this iron embrace.

The latest issue of *Poetry Review* focuses on women poets. When asked why there are more good women poets publishing today, Alice Oswald replies: 'Contraception.' Kate Clanchy, winner of last year's Forward prize for her collection, believes that '...a generation of appropriately educated women are reaching an appropriate age. This may sound bland, but it's an amazing position to be in.' *Poetry Review's* *Beyond the Bell Jar* Volume 86, No 4, edited by Peter Forbes (£5.95, pp96) introduces work by these and other women poets, offers new studies of poets as diverse as Sylvia Plath and Rosemary Tonks, and prints new poems, including an outstanding, sinuously dramatic monologue piece by Jo Shapcott. But this is no self-satisfied sisterfest: there are tough things to be said as well, and writers such as Carol Rumens and Sheenagh Pugh are prepared to say them. *Beyond the Bell Jar* has bite. It shows how far women poets have come, and how much they expect of themselves now that being in print is not, in itself, a cause for celebration.