

MRI r i

Inside the cavernous bright white whale belly,
of the MRI, and the excruciating booms, bangs, sighs
of the sonosomethings supposed to find something
wrong with me finally and the reason why, I suddenly wonder
why some people use the lower case 'i' and remember asking
Bukowski why he did and he said it was easier to type lower case
nights he wrote poetry on his manual typewriter drunk as a skunk
so i wrote poetry lower case for a while till i felt silly and GROAN
the MRI screams, barks BOOM! and the universe is born! BOOM!
a dinosaur falls into a smoky abyss BOOM and Sir Gawain's sword
severs the green claws of a dragon and BOOM your children are
born, boom the sound of sea storm, world wars, a son saying
he doesn't love you any more, sigh, your back arches, chest heaves,
your breasts collapse as you clutch your Frida Kahlo t-shirt, MRI
milagra, cotton long-sufferer Frida you wore to protect you, be
bodyguard-irony like Aretha Franklin the day you played 'Respect'
on the North Beach Condor Room jukebox in 1967 where you
go-go danced; r-e-s-p-e-c-t, you wanted, but didn't get no; boom,
burp MRI vomits you and you tell the scrupulous MRI technician:
'My mother died in one of those.'
You're kidding, he says, incredulously, not believing you.
'No, it's true, she really did,' you say but to torture him the way his
MRI tortured you, you don't tell doctors revived her with CPR, just
for a while, though, till she lapsed back into her coma dying of those
things inside her head you might now have too so she didn't hear you
yell at the doctors: DON'T HURT HER! Nor did she know you ran
the minute mile down the hospital hail when you heard the intercom
cry CODE BLUE! How you ran right to the MRI room though you
didn't know where it was. So she died not knowing she wasn't alone.
She died like we all do: strange, sad, death shrouded in sneaky mystery.
'You made it,' says my husband in the car. 'Frida will bring you luck.'
My skull brimming with booms, bangs, sighs of Bad News migraine
memories, I say No, and know i will never wear this Frida t-shirt again.

DIFFICULT TO TELL YOUR DAUGHTER

Difficult to tell your daughter that you are dying.
Same illness that killed her grandmother, your mother. You
both saw the scenes, front row. Bedside, that is.
Your daughter is the one who put on a swimsuit to
bathe her in the shower while she sat bent up on a stool. Your
daughter is the one who has this same illness too. She lies in
bed with you now, wiping her green eyes.
Not tears; her eyes itch from the dry California weather.
Desert highs expected all through August and September.
You've not held your daughter for years; she's much taller.
Newborn, she lay so tiny sleeping between your breasts.
You kissed her hair sweet and warm as morning's bread.
Now you stroke her forehead as you did when she was 3.
She bats her eyes, remembering long ago peaceful dreams.

I can't live without my mother, she says, as fact, truth.
None of us can, I say, kiss her and conclude: But we do.

Michael di Placido

HARE

Alone
in a fallow field
as though he can't be seen.
(And you amazed, again,
at just how big they are.)

Not the brightest of course:
like jay-walking pheasants
or partridges, losing it,
just when the gun's being cocked.

But you *really* like him. Just know
he'd be a riot if he could talk –
how well you'd get on.
And those semaphore ears!

Now he's off again:
going like the clappers
over the furrows, doing that
buckled
bicycle wheel number

as though
just for the hell of it. As though,
even through
those clenched gnashers,

he just can't keep it all in.

HERON

You wouldn't be surprised if you heard
the clanking of metal when he took off.

Perhaps you've wandered into Jurassic Park?
Ridiculous, this gangling oddball.

But not that skewer of a beak
you imagine a fish seeing

through the shattering glass,
the whirl of water.

INVITATION

One day
it *will* happen
– that Italian feast in the garden:

long tables
under pergolas
clustered with grapes;

pasta, vino, dancing
and music – oh yes – *definitely* music;
Gigli, Pavarotti *and* Sinatra, capisce?

But most importantly, among the guest list, you.

And when the stragglers
are laughing down the lanes
to their taxis and cars,

we'll sit
by the little gnarled apple tree
as thudding moths shake the lanterns,

and I'll thank you, then,
with the backing of the open heavens
in the light of the last star.

STEVEN WALING'S BOOKSHELF (SHELF I)

The Diary of James Schuyler (Black Sparrow Press); James Schuyler: Collected Poems (Noonday); Kenneth Koch: Selected Poems (Carcanet); Seasons on Earth (Penguin); One Train (Carcanet); The Pleasures of Peace (Grove Press); Days & Night (Random House); Ian McMillan/Martyn Wiley: Tall In The Saddle/Nights (Smith/Doorstop); Martyn Wiley: The Live Album (Stride); Ian McMillan: Unselected Poems (Wide Skirt), How the Hornpipe Failed (Rivelin Grapheme), A Chin (Wide Skirt), The Changing Problem, Selected Poems, Perfect Catch, I Found This Shirt, Dad The Donkey's On Fire (Carcanet); Chris McCabe: The Hutton Inquiry (Salt); David Kennedy: The Elephant's Typewriter (Scratch); Lydia Tomkiw: Men's Talk, The Dreadful Swimmers (Wide Skirt); Robert Hershon: Into A Punchline (Hanging Loose); Mark Halliday: Selfwolf (Chicago); Tim Dlugos: Powerless (Serpent's Tail); David Trinidad: Answer Song (Serpent's Tail); Frank Lima: Underground with the Oriole (Dutton); Martin Stannard: Denying England (Wide Skirt), The Gracing of Days (Slow Dancer), A Hundred of Happiness (Smith/Doorstop), Writing Down the Days, Conversations with Myself (Stride), Difficulties & Exultations (Smith/Doorstop), Coral (Leafe), Easter (Waldean); Paul Violi: Fracas (Hanging Loose); Barbara Guest: Selected Poems (Carcanet), Miniatures (Wesleyan), If So, Tell Me (Reality Street), Fair Realism (Sun & Moon); John Ashbery: Wakefulness, Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror, Can you Hear Bird, Your Name Here, Hotel Lautremont, Flow Chart (Carcanet), Other Traditions (Harvard), Selected Poems (Paladin); Frank O'Hara: Lunch Poems (City Lights), Collected Poems (California); Sheila E. Murphy: Falling In Love Falling in Love with You Syntax (Potes & Poets); Roy Fisher: Running Changes (Ampersand), Interviews Through Time, and Selected Prose (Shearsman), The Dow Low Drop (Bloodaxe), A Furnace (Oxford), The Memorial Fountain (Northern House), Poems 1955-80 (Oxford), News for the Ear, A Homage to Roy Fisher (Stride)

Poets I Go Back To ...

We have a bumper crop of ‘PIGBT’ in this issue. As well as Liz Cashdan rejoicing in the relatively uncelebrated Charlotte Smith, and Chris Considine’s fresh take on the well-celebrated William Wordsworth, we have Alan Brownjohn rediscovering Roy Fuller in the context of the much missed *Listener* and the Third Programme of the Fifties. And finally Anthony Wilson’s moving tribute on p.28 to the work of poets who have helped him through his recent experience of cancer.

If you’ve ever had the ‘Desert Island Discs’ experience (the work of which eight poets would *you* take to your island?) let us know who and why (not all eight – one or two would do). We’re not looking for lit.crit, but personal experience of what certain poets have meant to you, and why you keep re-reading them.

On the other hand, if there’s a particular *book* that means a lot to you, you can write about it for our feature ‘The Collection’.

We can’t promise to publish them all, but we’d love to read them. 600-800 words would do.

Liz Cashdan

I go back to **Charlotte Smith**, not because she belongs to my reading past, since the reprint of her poems only came out in 1993, but because it’s a long way back to when they were first published in 1784. When I first started thinking about early Romantic women writers, I’d only heard of

Charlotte Smith as a novelist, so when someone told me to look at her *Elegiac Sonnets* I was surprised and intrigued and overwhelmed. One of her women contemporaries, Anna Seward, whose poetry I like to go back to as well, attacked Smith for her constant whinges. It is true that every sonnet of the ninety-two sonnets ends with a couplet (or sometimes more) full of despair – but the earlier lines tend to make up for it because of their close observation of things in the natural world.

Smith was married off at the age of sixteen to a spendthrift husband and then found his father’s legacy, which would have saved herself and her many children from poverty, had become tied up in Jarndyce-like legal complications which left her struggling, helpless and bitter for the rest of her life: hence the despairing tone of her sonnets. But because of her astute observation of people and nature the appeal of her poetry is just as strong today as it was over two hundred years ago.

Wordsworth acknowledged his indebtedness to her and also prophesied her fall into oblivion when he wrote that Smith was a woman ‘to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered’ (quoted in the blurb to her *Collected Poems*: ed. Stuart Curran, Oxford 1993). It wasn’t just her sonnets that Wordsworth and other poets, male and female, might feel respect for. Smith wrote two long poems in blank verse, ‘The Emigrants’ (1793) and ‘Beachy Head’ (1807), dealing with political and personal issues. She lived in Sussex so the Downs and the River Arun do for her what the Derwent and the Lakeland hills did for Wordsworth.

I’ll quote from two of her sonnets which have stayed with me since I first read them.

Here are the first seven lines (before the despair sets in) of ‘To Spring’:

Again the wood, and long-withdrawing vale,
In many a tint of tender green are drest,
Where the young leaves, unfolding, scarce conceal
Beneath their early shade, the half-formed nest
Of finch or woodlark; and the primrose pales,

And lavish cowslip, wildly scatter'd round,
Give their sweet spirits to the sighing gale.

This is 'The glow-worm' (with only one line of despair at the end!)

When on some balmy-breathing night of Spring
The happy child, to whom the world is new,
Pursues the evening moth, of mealy wing,
Or from the heath-bell beats the sparkling dew:
He sees before his inexperienced eyes
The brilliant Glow-worm, like a meteor, shine
On the turf-bank: – amazed, and pleased, he cries,
'Star of the dewy grass!' – I make thee mine! –
Then, ere he sleep, collects the 'moisten'd' flower,
And bids soft leaves his glittering prize enfold
And dreams that Fairy-lamps illumine his bower;
Yet with the morning shudders to behold
His lucid treasure, rayless as the dust!
– So turn the world's bright joys to cold and blank disgust.

Interestingly, Smith acknowledges in footnotes that 'star of the dewy grass' is taken from Erasmus Darwin's 'star of the earth; and 'moisten'd flower' from Walcot's 'moisten'd blade'. So perhaps modern poets can afford to be less anxious about plagiarism or influence.

In 'The Emigrants' Smith comments upon the plight of refugees from the French Revolution washed up on the shores (literally) of England, and the almost equal helplessness of those in England who would like to help but can do nothing. She refers to 'the troubled waves' and the 'broad surf that never ceasing breaks/ On the innumerable pebbles.' She describes the children of a refugee mother playing on the beach:

who pick the fretted stone, or glossy shell,
Or crimson plant marine: or they contrive
The fairy vessel, with its ribband sail
And gilded pennant: in the pool,
Left by the salt wave on the yielding sands,
They launch the mimic navy.

But at the same time as expressing sympathy for these people, she mourns the passing of 'Patriot Virtue' from France and in a footnote says she is aware there will be those

who claim such virtue never existed. And hope comes, she insists, with 'the primroses' pale stars.' but then wonders again whether she or they will feel again 'the joy reviving Nature brings.' In spite of herself she has to go back to what Nature did for her as a child,

...to those hours of simple joy,
When, on the banks of Arun, which I see
Make its irriguous course thro' yonder meads,
I play'd; unconscious then of future ill!
There (where, from hollows fring'd with yellow broom,
The birch with silver rind, and fairy leaf,
Aslant the low stream trembles) I have stood,
And meditated how to venture best
Into the shallow current, to procure
The willow herb of glowing purple spikes,
Or flags, whose sword-like leaves conceal'd tide,
Startling the timid reed-bird from her nest,
As with aquatic flowers I wove the wreath...

And at the end of the poem, once 'noxious vapours' have been driven from the 'blighted earth', she expects 'The reign of Reason, Liberty, and Peace!'

In 'Beachy Head' Smith again brings the personal and political together somehow hoping that a belief in Nature will work against the man who violates 'The sacred freedom of his fellow man.' She has a slightly disingenuous belief that the local shepherd watching his sheep near Beachy Head is free of these troubles while wife and children are content to 'pile the stones/ In rugged pyramids' on the ground 'stony and cold and hostile to the plough/ where clamouring loud, the evening curlew runs/And drops her spotted eggs among the flints.' Well, I have to forgive her some of her politics for the sake of the poetry (just as I have to forgive her for her anti-semitism in her otherwise pretty radical novels!) I've learned a lot about wild flowers and birds from Smith and I can't help being persuaded by the ingenious way her poems combine both the personal and political. Her poetry is well worth the two hundred years' journey back.

Chris Considine

Do I 'go back' to poets? I'm still discovering new ones – recent writers like Michael Donaghy and Anne Carson, or older ones like John Clare. And so much poetry is lodged in my mind that I don't need to 'go back' because it's always there.

As an English teacher I was privileged to spend a lot of my working life among the English poets, from Chaucer to the present day. But from my teens my favourites have been the English Romantics, and the one whose pages I am most likely to dip into again is **Wordsworth** – though I don't think I ever quite succeeded in communicating my enthusiasm to my students.

Reading him from a poet's viewpoint there is a lot to learn. Firstly, he wrote *Far Too Much* – not selective enough. (I'm currently re-reading a slim collection of Wordsworth's poetry and prose edited by Philip Hobsbaum for Routledge.) Secondly he had the bad habit of revising the same poem again and again through the years, generally making it worse. Thirdly, he let himself be persuaded by a friend that he 'ought' to be writing a large philosophical treatise of a poem, which he was unfitted for (which poetry is unfitted for?). This weighed on his mind and made him hesitate to write the kind of lyric and narrative poems that he *was* good at.

We probably agree with Wordsworth's opinions that strong feeling is important in a poem, that it should be written using the real language of real people, and that we should aim at freshness of expression and avoid cliché. Also, from his poetry we see how much more valuable the image is than commentary on it.

Leave out the poems from the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, anything imposed on you in childhood such as 'To Daffodils', and anything that sounds tedious such as 'Ode to Duty' or 'Ecclesiastical Sketches'. There are some good sonnets: 'Upon Westminster Bridge' for example, or my favourite, 'Surprised by Joy' about the death of

his little daughter Catherine, and several other attractive short poems: 'The Solitary Reaper' (suggested by a trip to Scotland) or 'She was a Phantom of Delight' (to his wife Mary).

It's also worth looking at the 'Lucy' poems. Do they work? To what extent can understatement convey strong emotion? 'But she is in her grave, and Oh! / The difference to me.'

What's best in Wordsworth is poetry about his own experiences – things that delighted or moved him personally. We may have gained the impression that he was tedious or self-absorbed, but this is contradicted by the precision and vividness of his best writing. For example, there are portraits of country people like his neighbours, such as the shepherd Michael, who risked so much in his attempt to hang on to his small family farm; Margaret, the housewife in 'The Ruined Cottage' who fell into depression after her husband left; and people Wordsworth met on walks, like the old leech-gatherer or the homeless ex-soldier:

tall
And lank and upright. There was in his form
A meagre stiffness. You might almost think
That his bones wounded him.

These poems are full of compassion. Their detailed description makes them seem fresh and real – but what we are shown also has a symbolic value: the unfinished sheepfold the defeated Michael used to visit 'But never lifted up a single stone', or Margaret's decaying cottage and its garden lapsing into wilderness.

My favourites, though, are the autobiographical narratives: the first short version of 'The Prelude' and other similar passages about Wordsworth's own boyhood. Often amazingly lively and detailed, they are at the same time very real and also full of a dreamlike or mythic quality. Wordsworth spoke of 'spots of time' – epiphanies – moments brilliant in themselves but suggestive of something more than themselves. Epiphanies, you feel, are what poetry is for – and how sad that William Wordsworth seems to have stopped experiencing them so early in his career.

The twelve pages of 'The Prelude' 1798-9, First Part, are like a series of memorable short films, such as his guiltily 'borrowing' a rowing boat and looking up to see a 'huge cliff' appearing and gradually growing taller and seeming to pursue him; the skaters on the frozen lake, when 'the precipices rang aloud / The leafless trees and every icy crag / Tinkled like iron'; boatmen recovering a drowned man from Esthwaite Lake; or the memory of waiting for his father (soon to die) in a scene of

wind, and sleety rain,
And all the business of the elements,
The single sheep and the one blasted tree,
And the bleak music of that old stone wall.

Or what about the mixture of precise observation and delight in the natural world in this passage from 'There was a boy'? (incorporated in altered form into the 1805 'Prelude'):

[The boy would] stand alone
Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lakes
And through his fingers woven in one close knot
Blow mimic hootings to the silent owls
And bid them answer him. And they would shout
Across the watery vale and shout again
Responsive to my call with tremulous sobs
And long halloos and screams and echoes loud
Redoubled and redoubled...

(This passage was slammed by a contemporary critic, which suggests that critics may not always be right.)

Or this passage, intended originally as part of 'Michael'
– obviously another childhood memory – in which a boy

Unsettled with his foot a tuft of snow
Small as a sparrow's egg, which sliding down
Inch after inch before a yard were gone
Had gathered up a small round mass that split
With its own weight and made a hundred tufts
Which branching each his several way did each
Collect his separate mass which one and all
Went bounding on till in its turn each broke
Into a thousand fragments which bounced off
Splitting and gathering till the mountain seemed
Raced over by a thousand living things,
Ten thousand snow-white rabbits of the cliffs.

Alan Brownjohn

HIS FITNESS CLASS

The exercises continue in his head.
Walk towards me in the mirror, the instructress says.
She walks adroitly backwards as they do that,
Nine clothed individuals, rehabilitating.
Now march on the spot, she insists; and she does it with them.
The mirror is there ten hours later in his bed,
The radio announcing *Minus nine frost in places*
For when he is asleep.

He is still clothed,
But in last month's sheets. Because of the forecast,
lie pulls up the blankets. The exercises
Go on even now as he snaps off the bedside lamp
And drifts away through the mirror... Forgetting the post-it:
CHANGE THE BEDCLOTHES! To-morrow morning.
In case she stays.

Reviews

by

Neil Roberts, Steven Waling, Ian Pople, Paul
Batchelor and Michael di Placido

Neil Roberts

Penelope Shuttle, *Redgrove's Wife*, £8.95

Bloodaxe Books, Highgreen, Tarsset, Northumberland NE48 1RP

There were once two gifted poets who met, fell in love and married. Theirs was an extraordinary creative partnership that profoundly influenced the work of both. Then one of them died...

I hope it's not a cheap shot to open a review of Penelope Shuttle's collection of elegies for Peter Redgrove in terms that recall *Birthday Letters*. Her poems don't resemble Hughes's, or have anything like the same agitated public context. Her partnership with Redgrove was far happier, longer-lasting and more productive than that of Hughes and Plath. But, by calling the book *Redgrove's Wife*, and being explicit about the biographical context on the cover, she reminds the reader that these are, like Hughes's, elegies for a public and literary, as well as private and personal relationship.

This double perspective is especially relevant to the title poem which, in fact, was not written as an elegy but 'as a wedding anniversary poem for Peter two years before he died', a time when, in reaction to his declining health, she 'fought off depression and anger, not always successfully.'

Who is 'Redgrove's Wife'? The multiple possible answers to this question are reflected in the poem's double-voiced, question-and-answer form:

Pity Redgrove's Wife?

I think not.

Praise Redgrove's Wife?

Why not?...

Publish Redgrove's Wife?

I shall not.

(*But I shall.*)

'Redgrove's Wife' is the private married person who accepts the blessings and hardships of committed relationship. She is also his partner in a public enterprise: their jointly-authored studies of sexuality, *The Wise Wound* and *Alchemy for Women*, and volumes of poetry and fiction. There may also be a more rueful note: that although she had seven collections published by Oxford and Carcanet, and may well have sold at least as many books as he, she was (or was seen to be) somewhat in the shadow of his more flamboyant poetic personality. Then there is the doubleness of the circumstances of the poem's composition and publication. Redgrove's wife is now Redgrove's widow; she

grieves for him in the poems at the heart of this volume; but her grief also has a more public aspect: how can the surviving half of such a partnership go on?

Think of me without you,
stuck here forever between rainless May
and the drought of June.
(‘Missing You’ 16)

Those lines are from ‘Missing You’, a sequence of twenty-four poems in which Shuttle not only shows how she can go on, but also shows how the classic elegy can be endlessly renewed by a poet of sufficient purity and intensity of gift and feeling. She captures both the ordinariness and the relentlessness of grief in lines that must resonate with many readers:

I wept in Tesco
Sainsburys
and in Boots

where they gave me
medicine for grief

But I wept in Asda,
in Woolworths
and in the library

where they gave me
books on grief

Shuttle’s characteristic wit and sense of absurdity are never far away – the intelligence that, one suspects, is one of the powers that carried her through the devastating experiences recorded here. The poems are written from this side of a speechless gulf; and Shuttle is an intellectual poet who is aware of the condition of being outside discourse:

Like an alphabet
refusing to breed in captivity

or a holy city
left out of history,

I scatter your ashes
in the autumn tide
(‘To Be Whispered’)

She imagines that she might follow the loved one in his

new life
as salt water,

not return to the empty house
where nothing of you lingers,

summer
shut and barred behind you,

and begin once more
to draw pictures of your absence

till it seems you’re right at my fingertips
if only I can work out how to touch you

That last line’s monosyllabic awkwardness and stumbling rhythm, as if collapsing back into the condition of ‘an alphabet/ refusing to breed in captivity’, is a heart-stopping effect of deceptive simplicity.

Not all the poems in *Redgrove’s Wife* are elegies. Poems such as ‘The Breather Among the Metals’ and ‘Ore’ remind us of Shuttle’s robust interest in the material world, and there are a few pieces of high-spirited absurdity, such as ‘Footnotes’ and ‘Learning to Drive’. One of Shuttle’s most beguiling gifts is turning an apparently banal observation to bring home its uncomfortable truth: ‘I was running out of time/ or time was running out of me’ (‘Running Out of Time’); ‘I can’t cry anyone’s tears except my own’ (‘Missing You 3’).

One of my favourite poems in this collection, ‘Dukedom’, is not presented as an elegy, but strikes me as both a personal and a poetic tribute to Redgrove. He was the great celebrator of the feminine in humanity and nature: of nature as the ‘Goddess’, in poems such as ‘The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach’, ‘Six Odes’ and ‘The Quiet Woman of Chancery Lane’. Shuttle’s poem perhaps wryly, certainly encomiastically, celebrates a male nature god, who stylistically at least sounds very much like Redgrove himself.

He folds me in his septembers worked
in ivory silk, in his seascapes of living memory.
He wraps me in his dukedom
of windfall, goldfinch and peach.
He inflicts his dukedom on me like dew on a fountain,
like a year of consents,

like a lily merchant.

He brings me a list of colours ranked in order of sleep.

The last line, in particular, sounds to me like an imitation of Redgrove lines such as 'She wears the long series of wonder-awakening dresses' ('Six Odes'). One might speculate that Redgrove's own achievement makes possible, paradoxically, this reversal of his gendering of nature.

Sometimes a poet who is well established, and has a following, needs one volume to capture the imagination in a particular way, to become her or his 'classic'. This might be the book which does that for Penelope Shuttle.

Steven Waling

Gael Turnbull, *There Are Words (Collected Poems)*

Shearsman Books, 58 Velwell Road, Exeter EX4 4LD

Tony Connor, *Things Unsaid (New & Selected Poems)*

Anvil Press, Neptune House, 70 Royal Hill, London SE10 8RF

There are, apparently, sides to be taken in poetry. If you like mainstream poetry, you couldn't possibly find anything good in non-mainstream or innovative poetry, and vice-versa.

Well, here are two substantial collections by poets from poets coming from the opposite end of the spectrum and I'm finding it hard to distinguish the one from the other.

Not really a true statement, that last one. There are, of course, substantial differences between the two in terms of style and content. **Gael Turnbull** was a Late Modernist writer whose poems are obviously influenced by the Black Mountain poetics of Olson and Creeley, and his poems range from the wilds of Scotland, to the city and all around the world. **Tony Connor**'s poetry largely stays in the province of the local and the personal, much of it around North

Manchester where he spent his early life in a calico mill.

What they both share, however, is an open-hearted dialogue between self and world and a predilection for the celebration of ordinary things. They do this in various ways: Connor by concentrating on his own memories of life in a very small area of Manchester, using plain language that sounds sometimes like somebody just chatting to you. The fiction of plain speech, in other words:

Many, in the way of things,
have been broken or lost – where
and how I can't remember;
yet they were all my darlings:
each one in its time a rare
companion and comforter.
(‘My Pipes’)

But, though Turnbull is a more obviously self-consciously stylised poet, he too never strays very far from plain words, deftly handled:

Love can be a small enamelled shell
picked up from the shingle at low tide

and then, it can happen, dropped and broken
or chipped away by too rough handling
or even crushed by greed for more

but also, the most terrible, misplaced
in a moment's lapse of care and then,
though you search for a lifetime
along the ocean strands of time,
it can happen, the same never found again.
(‘It Can Happen’)

It's a pleasure to read both these poets again, and to read them together. Tony Connor was one of the first poets I had a substantial collection of books by – all his early ones, given to me by a teacher who knew about my writing of poetry. I read Turnbull much later, after I'd read Carlos Williams and much more modernist poetry. Both are essentially lyric poets – neither has written their version of modernist epic, such as Pound's *Cantos* or Olson's *Maximus* poems. Turnbull is particularly good at the short epigrammatic poem, and indeed, wrote whole books of them, as well as

experimenting with prose poetry, and with programmatic poems like 'Twenty Words, Twenty Days' where a word was picked out of a dictionary and became the focus of that day's poem.

Tony Connor might well think such games to be mucking about. His poems are all left-justified, sometimes rhyming, more usually not later on, anecdotal, rambling tales about his life and times. Whereas Turnbull writes about George Fox, or about nature, all kinds of subject matter, Connor stays at home. However long he's lived in America, he's never become an American poet.

So they're nothing like each other then? But you said...

What they both share can be summed up by the modernist adage, *truth to materials*. They write from their experience, from the knowledge they've picked up along their lives and there is no – or almost no – inflated ego, no showing-off. One can trace Connor's poetry back to Larkin – though he puts me more in mind of Alan Sillitoe's prose – but it's a much less miserable and more sympathetic Larkin if he is. Turnbull was a doctor, and you can see his compassion also shine forth from his poems.

So here we have two very different poets, both unjustly neglected by the poetry reading public, who in their warmth and humanity, in their approach to their very different materials, nevertheless share much in common. Here's an extract from each:

Stealthily parting the small-hours silence,
a hardly-embodied figment of his brain
comes down to sit with me
as I work late.
Flat-footed, as though his legs and feet
were still asleep.

He sits on a stool,
staring into the fire,
his dummy dangling.

Fire ignites the small coals of his eyes.
It stares back through the holes
into his head, into the darkness.

I ask what woke him?

'A wolf dreamed me' he says.
(*'A Child Half-Asleep'*)

It is late afternoon and already dark.
I have been walking all day across open moorland.
I come to a forest.

It has been snowing for days.
Packed down on the road.
Drifted on the banks.
Clinging to the branches.
I hear only the grating of the boughs
under their frozen weight
and the frozen weight
and the crunch of my feet on the road
and the creak of the snow
as it settles itself in the drift...
(*'It is late afternoon and already dark'*)

And if you want to know who wrote each, you'll have to buy their books...