

concentration of money, a modest technical proficiency, and folly."

Since folly has never been in short supply, it is possible that some resurgent Hitler, or Gaddafi or Idi Amin would have a go and land us with a lot of creatures devoid of singular identity, which has always so far been regarded as an essential human characteristic. If so, biology is as fascinatingly dangerous as atomic physics, and the myth of the Sorcerer's Apprentice is as fresh as ever.

Clearly, post-Enlightenment thought still has some way to go before "evolved" Nature (reflective man) brings "raw" Nature (man himself as animal, together with his setting) under control.

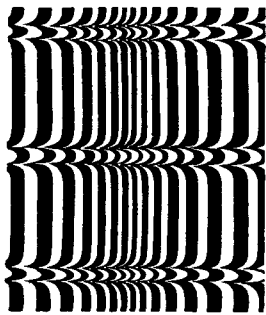
The early hope of the Enlightenment was to define the nature of man, so as to adjust society and the world harmoniously to his needs. The definition has proved to be much more difficult than was once thought, so much so indeed that the Medawars quote, with no apparent reservations, an

aphorism they attribute to Merleau-Ponty: "It is in the nature of man to have no nature." Actually, Merleau-Ponty was echoing Sartre who, in his wildly romantic thirst for God-like freedom, dogmatically rejected *la nature humaine* as a limiting concept inherited from the obscurantisms of the past.

Obviously man, in comparison with the other animals and because of exogenetic evolution, has a very complex and fluid nature, which has taken various historical forms, and will no doubt take others in the future. But if, in the last resort, there is no such thing as "human nature" that biological science or other kinds of knowledge can hope to define, there is no basis on which to build a progressively more harmonious society, and the "melioration" postulated by the Medawars evaporates into a sort of infinite regress open to any sort of incidental accident. Perhaps, in fact, this is the ultimate truth, but one hopes not. Here again, I find myself on Voltaire's side rather than Sartre's. If reason is to function as the Medawars (and others amongst us) would like it to do, then "human Nature" has to be taken as an indispensable working-hypothesis, that is, as a provisional faith.

From Wave to Cave

Recent Poetry—By JOHN MOLE



IT SEEMS appropriate to open this review by considering the work of a highly-regarded American poet whose entire opus to date has been a sort of never-ending overture. To take a phrase from the long title poem of his latest collection, *A Wave*,¹ John Ashbery's is a poetry of "consistent eventfulness." Everything happens where he is, and almost anything goes. *Where* it goes, though, is not so much a destination as the happening itself:

*And the serial continues:
Pain, expiation, delight, more pain,
A frieze that lengthens continually, in the happy way
Friezes do, and no plot is produced,
Nothing you could hang an identifying question on.*

Besides, there's no time to stop for questions. You don't get off the serial loop of an Ashbery poem at any stage. Some of the noises may bewilder you but there's no danger of the tape getting snarled up in the machine. It runs with a hypnotic smoothness and the confidence of total efficiency. "We get lost in life, but life knows where we are." Ashbery is very fond of

making statements like this. He can be as portentous en route through a poem as he can be gamesome in his titles—"Ditto, Kiddo", "Just Someone you say Hi to", etc.—but whether or not you give your assent there can be no doubt that to substitute *the poem* for *life* in that particular statement is to come up with a fair definition of what it often feels like somewhere in the middle.

The poem knows where we are, all right. It put us all there in the first place, Ashbery included. He's the delighted victim of his own ingenuity. Not for him "the tedium/Of self-expression." Anything but. All is subordinate to the process of defining the process. As he says in a witty prose piece, "Description of a Masque":

"Then we all realised what should have been obvious from the start: that the setting would go on evolving eternally, rolling its waves across our vision like an ocean, each one new yet recognizably a part of the same series, which was creation itself. . . . And the corollary of all this was that we would go on witnessing these tableaux, not that anything prevented us from leaving the theater, but there was no alternative to our interest in finding out what would happen next."

I feel this exactly as I read the poems. I'm certainly interested, intrigued even, but there's no alternative to my curiosity as to how Ashbery is going to get out of it this time. He *will*, of course—he's outstandingly accomplished—and yet, for the duration, I'm totally absorbed by the display. Poem after poem

¹ *A Wave*. By JOHN ASHBERY. Carcanet, £4.95.

What are conservatives saying about Sex and God in American Politics?

"I didn't realize that this country's atheists and agnostics had such fragile character that the mere mention of God might cause them grave distress. I am sorry that the country's atheists are such wimps."

-R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

"These 13- and 14-year olds need to be encouraged to keep their knees together until they grow up and find husbands."

-Midge Decter

"I believe that homosexuals should be afforded total civil rights like all other Americans."

-Reverend Jerry Falwell

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reminds me of the jazz pianist Earl Hines' remark: "Every night I like to find a different harmonic route to a certain point, and when you see me smiling you know I'm lost." Ashbery is smiling all the time, and it's the confidence that does it. He's the supreme *improvisateur*, an aesthetic adventurer who gets lost without ever losing his cool. The more elaborately he can tease his material, himself, and his reader so that "we . . . all become part of a collective movement" the happier he is. "I know that I braid too much my own/Snapped-off perceptions of things as they come to me", he has written in a poem from an earlier volume, and in another—

What is writing?

Well, in my case, it's getting down on paper

Not thoughts, exactly, but ideas, maybe:

Ideas about thoughts. Thoughts is too grand a word.

Ideas is better, though not precisely what I mean.

Someday I'll explain. Not today though.

Not in *A Wave* either. Ashbery has gone on evading those "identifying questions" like the Protean master he is. Always he's somewhere else already, relishing a new dimension—"the segments of the trip swing open like an orange"—and sporting in it, juggling those snapped-off perceptions:

I think all games and disciplines are contained here,

Painting, as they go, dots and asterisks that

We force into meanings that don't concern us

And so leave us behind. . . .

But what *does* concern us? Occasionally these poems disturb with a truly memorable or chilling line—"Being alone at the center of a moan that did not issue from me"—but I can never quite believe it. It's too close to "the tedium of self-expression." No, the game's the thing. When "suddenly the lonesomeness becomes a pleasant city/Fanning out around a lake"—that's the quintessential Ashbery event. Yet another opportunity for intelligent discourse in a cool, well-lighted place.

AMY CLAMPITT'S WELL-LIGHTED place is the guest room where

we get a fire going, listen

to Mozart, read Marianne Moore, or

sit looking out at the eiders, trig

in their white-over-black as they tip

and tuck themselves into the swell, almost

as though diving under the eiderdown

in a gemütlich hotel room at Innsbruck.

Her first full-length collection, *The Kingfisher*,² is a most impressive debut. The English edition has been slimmed down from the American volume which contained an additional eighteen poems and some explanatory notes, but it is still a substantial book. Amy Clampitt owes much to what Elizabeth Bishop, describing Marianne Moore, called her *chinoiserie* of manners, and reading *The Kingfisher* puts me in mind, too, of

Bishop's delightful account of how her friend, when not at her desk, used a clipboard with the poem under construction on it, carrying it about the apartment "even when I'm dusting or washing the dishes, Elizabeth."

I imagine Amy Clampitt with a similar clipboard in the several guest rooms she has occupied throughout what seems a provisional but mellow cosiness of exile—even on the Dorset farm recalled in her excellent poem "On the Disadvantages of Central Heating" with "big eager sheepdogs/muscling in on bookish profundities." Hers is an exquisite vocabulary of objects, deployed with a precision which seldom becomes precious throughout poems remarkable for their sustained passages of meditation. She seems aware of that predilection for "bookish profundities" and is often nicely ironic at her own expense:

Hemmed in by the prim

deodorizing stare

of the rare-book room,

I stumbled over,

lodged under glass, a

revenant Essay on Color

by Mary Gartside, a woman

I'd never heard of, open

to a hand-rendered

watercolor illustration

wet-bright as the day

its unadulterated red-

and-yellow was laid on

(publication date 1818).

Moore and Bishop would have approved of both the exactitude and the humour of that parenthesis, but Amy Clampitt's particular, demure, self-aware way of stumbling is all her own. She seems to me least successful when her carefully-worked images are too obviously merely themselves and not fully absorbed by her meditations on botany, art, music and friendship. This is particularly noticeable when she looks at what Ashbery calls "the topiary trash of the present": "Daily the cortege of crumpled/defunct cars/goes by by the lasagna-/layered flatbed/truckload. . . ." Another Martian bites the dustbowl. But not too often.

THE COVER ILLUSTRATION for Medbh McGuckian's second collection, *Venus and the Rain*,³ is a detail from a painting by the 19th-century Secessionist Jan Toorop. It has been well-chosen—a fluid, densely-textured canvas reproduced in shadowy monochrome. The perspective recedes into a forest of prominently-rooted, sinuous trees which gather round a dark, standing pool, and the whole scene is ambivalently enchanting and sinister. In the foreground, a child sits in a high-chair—as if *indoors*, and as if the backdrop of the forest were only a painter's illusion. Immediately behind the child, a young woman is standing in what appears to be a half-opened doorway. Is she coming out or in? Is she choosing the natural world or an elaborate fantasy? Or is she already the victim of a choice made for her in which the child is a crucial element?

² *The Kingfisher*. By AMY CLAMPITT. Faber, £4.00.

³ *Venus and the Rain*. By MEDBH MCGUCKIAN. Oxford University Press, £4.50.

To look closely at this picture is to be drawn into a close, teasing world of vital, unanswerable questions which are at the same time about the illusions of art and of domestic experience. To go on, then, to read Medbh McGuckian's poems is to continue the experience in colour. She's a fantasist of the everyday, and hers is a thoroughly up-to-date verse—"retelling the story/Of its own provocative fractures"—which applies many of the symbols of aesthetic romanticism to a thoroughly contemporary exploration of love and motherhood. Often she seems a rather more robust and domesticated *Dame aux Camélias*:

Each lighted
Window shows me cardiganed, more desolate
Than the garden, and more hallowed
Than the hinge of the brass-studded
Door that we close, and no one opens,
That we open and no one closes.

That juxtaposition of the desolate and the hallowed is characteristic, just as McGuckian's tone keeps shifting from the bewildered to the benign. However, it would be quite wrong to suggest that these poems are at all straightforwardly expressive. Self and others are a cluster of images to be arranged and rearranged kaleidoscopically:

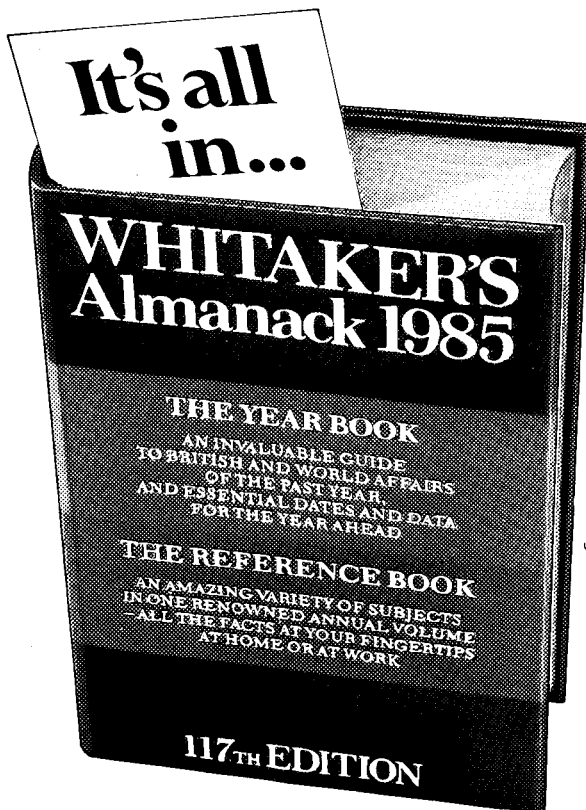
No matter
How hysterically the clouds swing out,
They may not alter by one drop of rain
The safari of the garden beds, or make
Louisa's dress with its oyster-coloured overlay

Of moss, kidnap me kindly for a day,
As though a second wife were sleeping
Already in your clothes, the sewn
Lilies near the ground growing downwards.

Sun, rain, house, garden, forest, etc. became both the constituents of personality and a means of defining relationships. At one moment the elemental is impinging on the domestic—"a waterfall/Unstitching itself down the front stairs"—and at the next a household prop transforms itself into an emotional strategy—"Except for the staircase that delivers you/Like a jetty into the middle of a lake,/There is no measure of arrival, no/Negotiation. . . ." This goes on all the time, a considerable poetic confidence at work on an obsessive ground of private enquiry.

Medbh McGuckian's poetry, impressive though it is, does raise the question of how far it's possible to take a coded practice before it becomes a restrictive one. She is in some ways an obscure writer despite the attractiveness of her imagery. Rather too often I feel that I have to take it on trust that, for example, "the change in your voice when speaking/Is like an orange in a snowdrift", and it's easy to get lost on one of her extended, metamorphic trails although she seems aware of this and even goes so far as to make it (by implication) one of her credentials when she suggests that "my longer and longer sentences/Prove me wholly female." Yes, but it could also prove her simply rather indulgent.

WHAT IMPINGES ON Selima Hill's world of family life appears to



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be not so much the elemental as the tamely transcendental. She is intrigued by ancient history, particularly by the Egyptian deities, and is continually surprised by double-take, though never to the extent of having her composure shaken:

*When I meet her at the station, I say
Hello, Mum! and think Hello, Thoth,
This is the Weighing of the Heart.*

This is also the beginning of pretentiousness. Despite a pleasing humour, Selima Hill cannot avoid the curse of tedium, which seems to be casting its spell at the moment over several poets much published in what the blurb for *Saying Hello at the Station*⁴ rather smugly calls "leading literary journals." Like them, she chooses to mess about on the inlets of narrative, creating little eddies of counterflow—all those lower-cased, casually interjected voices, many of which turn out to be a digest of the poet's current reading list: "In 'Above Tooey Mountain', I am indebted to the letters of Sir James Melville, James Joyce's mother, and Gerard Manley Hopkins (written on the day that he died)." All well and good, but the result is an absorption of those writers' personalities into a flat monotone of utterance.

What Hill lacks overall is any sense of rhythm or daring beyond what is licensed by the vogue. In anecdotal poems such as "The Flowers", "The Bicycle Ride" and "Chicken

Feathers" she shows what she could do if she were to trust more to her gift for candid, direct observation:

*He went to his room with an orange
in his hand and died there
sometime during the afternoon.
My mother spent her day in the kitchen.
When I came in from the garden
I was sent upstairs
to call him down to tea:
he was sitting by the window
with his back to me.
On the table beside him
were four boats made of orange peel,
with the pith piled neatly inside them.
My mother couldn't stand up.
She kept saying she was sorry,
but she couldn't stand up.
It must be the shock she said.
It wasn't grief.
Come and sit down she said,
And have your tea.*

Good, and deceptively modest. Selima Hill has the makings of an individual voice which will stand more chance of being heard if she can resist going for the flatness of a fashionably contemporary tone.

⁴ *Saying Hello at the Station*. By SELIMA HILL. Chatto & Windus, £2.95.

⁵ *The Stubborn Forest*. By PAUL HYLAND. Bloodaxe Books, £3.95.

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IF MEDBH MCGUCKIAN and, to a lesser extent, Selima Hill are sibylline keepers of the mysteries, there's something in Paul Hyland of the gamekeeper at home. He's a plain speaker, and his is a rugged, hewn, earth-bound poetry which works hard to make clearings in the natural world where past and present can be seen as contiguous. However, although bones are very much alive for him in his thoroughly informed, historical imagination, he can rarely make them live for long in his verse. A typical poem is observant—"You mind things; you'm observant I can see", says one of the several countrymen he celebrates in *The Stubborn Forest*⁵—but, as he admits, "I am all eyes, pointing things out."

Too much of his work is just too closely packed for my taste, and his predilection for a matching density of language in the Anglo-Saxon vein reinforces the sense of verbal clutter which is strangely at odds with his desire to share an "open ground." In "Fin de Siècle",

*Patrons no longer jostle naked flanks
nor do pigs sag on hooks, strain senseless snouts
to scents raised from the sawdust by their blood.*

As Tennyson once said, "Kick the geese out of the boat." There'd still be plenty of room for the pigs.

Despite these reservations, and my suspicion that his portentous radiophonic workshop sequence, "Domingus", which rounds off the book is the kind of thing better left to second-rate imitators of Ted Hughes, I admire Hyland's work and his *example*. He's an excellent topographer. His Purbeck poems are a gritty clutch, and his portraits—particularly those which describe the endurance of old age—are often very moving indeed:

*her knuckles whiten as she lifts the cup's
thick rim, so gently, to her parched blue lips,
steam clouds her eyes, and gently, as she sips,
age beats the living daylights out of her.*

So nearly an embarrassing contrivance, that striking last line is one of a number of similar tropes that Paul Hyland earns by the seriousness of his endeavour and gets away with by the skin of his teeth.

I'M NOT SO SURE that Herbert Lomas gets away with this (from his poem "Sad Cows"):

*Horses have a sense of humour, but these cows
Do not. Their slow gait has the float of hopelessness.
One hoists from the field like an old-age pensioner
Who's just remembered the loo and plods slow-motion,
Humping, as if into a gas chamber, leaning
On her shoulder-bones towards a place that's lost a
meaning.*

The kind of shock-tactic deployment of similes, here, whereby thoughts of the loo become the imminence of a gas-chamber amounts to a mixture of whimsicality and horror which I find disconcerting. Lomas is something of a satirist, and presumably I'm supposed to, but there seems to me a case for suggesting that if sentimentality is—as Eliot defined it—emotion in excess of the fact, then lapses of taste can often be recognised by allusiveness inappropriate to the emotion.

Certainly Lomas makes you *think* about last things. His enumeration of them is uncompromising and vivid. In "Nunhead Cemetery", "Some find the blackberries stewing here delicious:/Heat from the gravestones and corpsemeat nitrogen/Fatten up great black clots from the juice citizens." We're all citizens, yes, and in it together, but as verse these lines are as congested as the graveyard—heads of the characters hammering up blackberries—and Lomas rams his dark poems into the light with remorseless irony. "Even in the sun it's an air of funeral." His theme, a striving to achieve the redemption of that pervasive irony, is the unexpected suddenness of grace. In church—still as distracted by the godawfulness of things as in the graveyard—he seems about to give up when "here stuffed in a blue-chinned Greek-looking worshipper,/Pockets stuffed with evening newspapers, coat/Flapping, and grabs God by the throat/ / . . . And suddenly I'm in it: his grace has snatched/Me out. . . ."

What Lomas witnesses to, here, is moving, and *Fire in the Garden*⁶ does contain some memorable poems—particularly "The Bridges that Matter", "Elegy for Robin Lee", and "With the Pike Behind Her"—but a feeling of overkill remains. Grace is snatched like a quick bite at lunchtime in the public gardens of a city full of the mighty roar of mortal traffic, and the result is too often indigestion.

⁶ *Fire in the Garden*. By HERBERT LOMAS. Oxford University Press, £4.50.

⁷ *Moving In*. By CONNIE BENSLEY. Harry Chambers/Peterloo Poets, £4.50.

⁸ *Familiars*. By PHILIP GROSS. Harry Chambers/Peterloo Poets, £3.00.

⁹ *The Ice Factory*. By PHILIP GROSS. Faber, £3.25.

BEGINNING HER POEM "Self Selection", Connie Bensley exclaims: "At last *Safeways*/Has made a notable contribution/To everyday philosophical thought"—as if she had been waiting all her life for it to do so, without for a moment believing that it ever would. This catches exactly the tone of much of her work, an ironic relish for life's little surprises (by no means all of them pleasant) within the more pervasive context of a compassionate, if somewhat chilly, acceptance of domestic routine. The poems in *Moving In*,⁷ her second collection, are sharp, intelligent, vulnerably immaculate, and they make much of their impact by pulling the shreds of whatever carpet remains from under your feet.

Working against these strengths, though, is a minimalist tendency which reduces the scale of painful experience to what can be accommodated in a few snappy lines of desolate irony. Here is the whole of "Short Story":

*As I knocked the cup from the shelf
my mind flashed up reprises:
that glass you dropped, the dark hotel room,
my letter in the rack, your car driving away;
a masterpiece of précis.
The cup hits the floor. I turn to pick up the pieces.*

This is certainly accomplished—a skilful *précis*, if not a masterpiece of the art—but I find it just a bit too coolly fixed in its selectivity. The details are like stills outside a cinema, motion (and emotion) frozen into familiar attitudes and thereby isolated into cliché.

Moving In is an apt title in several ways. It is, of course, the photographer's means of getting a close-up, and stresses Connie Bensley's talent for startling the reader by suddenly focusing on an intimate moment of pain or shock. Also, as well as suggesting her awareness of how fragile and temporary any kind of residence is—and the most sympathetic side of her work derives from this—it points up her ironist's compulsion to move in for the kill. She can be devastatingly accurate, and poems such as "Scandal" and "The Innocent" are penny-peepshows—miniature, authentic horrors of the commonplace.

I'm less happy, though, about her over-readiness to go for the closure of a bite-on-the-bullet, laconic ending—"I hurry on. It looks like rain", "All it takes is time, rehearsal/and one's own gullibility", etc. A wry, terminal smile will only stretch so far. At most it provokes the shrug of assent, a *c'est la vie* complicity which is not far removed from the knowing wink. Although seldom comfortable, and with no illusions which have not been paid for, this can nevertheless appear to be a kind of *Safeways* poetry—brave hearts in the supermarket, a too-carefully-processed, bitter-sweet stoicism. It would be good to see Connie Bensley knocking tins off the shelf more often.

DUE TO THE PERSPICACITY of Harry Chambers—who recognised a talent before it came to wider attention by winning the National Poetry Competition in 1982—fifteen out of the forty poems in Philip Gross's first Faber collection have already appeared (plus three others) as a Peterloo volume, *Familiars*.⁸ Or rather, in several cases, as the acknowledgements in *The Ice Factory*⁹ point out, versions of them have.

Gross is a conscientious poet who beavers away to get it right. In some cases, with these reworkings, he has cut the poems by (and almost *in*) half, as with his impressive "The Displaced Persons Camp"—a title originally carrying the modish prefix "From" which he has wisely dropped. In others, the changes are minimal but significant. "First Encounter", about the birth of a child, and rather an over-written piece before and after treatment, seems to have been subject merely to a bit of tinkering to make it seem more immediate. "You would not be denied:/a moth-tap at the glass, a blip of fear/ /on a dark screen, homing" becomes "You were not to be denied./ A flicker of static, of morse: yes, yes./A blip on a dark screen, homing." It's interesting to see a good new poet learning like this. "Yes, yes" is an improvement, certainly, and yet . . . it does seem a trifle conscientiously worked-in after the impulse in order to give an otherwise inert poem the air of urgency.

Gross is the real thing, though—a poet already finding out how to go his own way. The compacted detail and ceremonial, elegiac stateliness of the title poem, "The Bone Ship", "Ignis Fatuus" and others owe plenty to the early Geoffrey Hill, and recollections of childhood transposed into the third person—like the excellent "The Musical Cottage"—recall the later MacNeice. The sooner he grows out of such Martian whimsicalities as "Crab" and "Snail Paces" ("They left small frills/to glide and teeter, balancing their shells/like the family china") the better, but a poem like "Beside the Reservoir" is impressive entirely in its own right:

*A surface still as marble. Drystone masonry
runs straight in, under. There is no other shore
but a thin brilliance of mist. One tree
stoops, waist-deep. At the small thud of a door*

*the gulls flush upwards briefly. By the car
two figures stand as if breath-taken. Once
they would have talked, talked, talked, troubling to share
this luminous distance. Now, he points*

*to bird-flecks drifting far out: a precarious
species, winter visitors. She takes his arm,
keeps company, through certain silences
accepted like the need for water, for the drowned farm.*

AT FIRST GLANCE, Patrick Hare appears to be merely one more purveyor of amiable, medium-length, comfortable fits of

reminiscence. Conversational, unhurried, he dwells on his early years in a Derbyshire village. I must admit to having been resistant, and hardly encouraged by a frequently self-conscious properness of syntax which keeps stiffening an already rather pedestrian verse into what seems an almost pedantic concentration on grammatical accuracy. There are sentences which read like parts of a translation exercise in an old Latin Primer—"Had not the wall anchored him he would have/Hammered my bones . . ."—but I finished *Aeroplanes in Childhood*¹⁰ with more than a little admiration.

There's a touch of the genuine visionary in Patrick Hare. His poems are a variety of burnished, heraldic nostalgia. Milk churns shine "like armour dented/From championship", the face of a shadowy poacher is "a moonlit mask", and the sky behind those childhood aeroplanes is an "unaltered blue faithful as in a story." This sense of being part of a myth not entirely of one's own making is something Hare has in common with Edwin Muir, whose Orkney recollections kept coming to mind as I read. Like Muir, Hare still has one foot in Eden, and firmly enough to prevent him from becoming sentimental. When he recalls a field full of cows in "Convoy Accident, 1943", he has not forgotten how "The grass creaked in their guileless mouths." That's a marvellous line, and his book is full of such luminous details. They're intensified, too, by a continual fear of exile or even excommunication: "Sister Perpetua on the landline . . . her rebuke, her sure arrival." In one poem, "The Misses Duke", he describes an occasion when

*in the parlour
With Papa in a haloed snap
Eternally teasing them,
They ate the cake that failed.*

What has certainly not failed for Patrick Hare is the *light*. A "haloed snap" is just what several of his best poems become, much as Samuel Palmer's "Valley of Vision" could be called a series of haloed paintings. The village of Two Dales is Hare's Shoreham. Uneven, often clumsy, *Aeroplanes in Childhood* is nevertheless a distinctive achievement.

SEVERAL OF B. C. LEALE's poems are *about* paintings or, in this case ("Sketch by Constable"), concerned with the early stages of a very well-known one:

*The dog knows it's an early draft. He's
full of destinations and joy as he
rounds the first bend from the house—
his shadow sharp, vibrant. Even the
path's edge is of frisky earth.*

*About five years later he's finished.
His short run by the water's edge completed and
he's famous. With muted shadow he looks up
to the men in a motionless hay-wain.*

Leale's sympathies are clearly with that "sharp, vibrant" early joyfulness. The men in the motionless hay-wain have the

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¹⁰ *Aeroplanes in Childhood*. By PATRICK HARE. Harry Chambers/Peterloo Poets, £4.50.

posthumous dignity of Fine Art, and one suspects that he's as bored by completion as the dog is.

Leale's a provisionalist, committed to experiment and a modest amount of risk. Large, finished canvases are not for him, and *Leviathan*,¹¹ his first full collection although he's now into his fifties, has all the freshness of a painter's (and musician's) sketchbook. His short poems, often two to a page and still with plenty of white space around them, are packed with a pithy, doodling wisdom. Many of them delight in ellipses and the shorthand urgency of ampersands, but there's nothing diffuse about them—they become the instances of their composition. Often it's as if the notes for a poem have, surreptitiously, become the poem itself, and Leale knows how to leave well alone. Only a thoroughly practised writer is able to resist working his marginalia towards the centre of the page. Like the footprint in wet cement which he observes in "Marked Remains", his instinct is for "disturbing a surface/casually/for ever" (the significant weight of a single line given to that *casually*) and his playful linguistic displacements are of a piece with his more overtly serious inventiveness—as in "A Vegetation to be Ready by the Parsnip":

*Aubergine aubergine
Lettuce pray for the marrow
For no one radishes the end
We have all cucumbered our unworthy chives
With foul swedes
It ill beetroots us to publicly sprout pea
From the endive our fennels
None escapes the cabbages of thyme
Even the wisest sage comes to a spinach
Celery celery I say unto you
This is the cauliflower
When salsifiers all
Artichoke and kale.*

Joyce-speak, Milliganese, and Professor-Stanley-Unwinism all have a share in such cleverness. In his darker moments, Leale acknowledges the huge desolation of *Leviathan*—"your irredeemable dark chanting sounding within us"—and glimpses of intense loneliness keep surfacing throughout his book, but his chief commitment is to the pleasure-principle of improvisation.

I FIND IT DIFFICULT to see what principle Frank Kuppner is committed to in *A Bad Day for the Sung Dynasty*.¹² His own account of what he's up to can be quoted, for convenience, from a blurb which announces it as being "characteristically self-deprecating":

"This work consists of 501 4-line observations and 10 4-line observations on the verse form, which is taken from the common usage of translators of Chinese poetry, provoked by looking at the illustrations in Osvald Siren's *Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles* (London, Lund

Humphries, 1956-8), and feeling certain that the whole story was not being told. Many of them are supposed to be funny."

Supposed to be? Whether that's an invitation to laughter, or the Emperor's command, is not quite clear. Perhaps it's all part of the self-deprecation. Perhaps it means that if you're not laughing—or smiling inscrutably—you must be in league with those Li-po-faced reviewers who can't take a joke. But it is difficult to take one at such length. The "whole story" strikes me as adding up to an enterprise in cod-orientalism, as if a stand-up comic poet from the Versewaggon had hit upon the idea of doing a tour of the classiest Chinese restaurants. There's plenty of dead-pan wit and wisdom, much of it by courtesy of willow-pattern:

*It is a hard thing, deliberately to choose a cave
Inaccessible halfway up a cliff to meditate in,
And then glance down one morning in a state of comparative bliss
To discover a sea-level below, rising alarmingly.*

True. Many of these narrative vignettes—touching on themes of politics, art and philosophy—take a delight in the thought-provoking properties of bathos:

*In paradise, the collection of Buddhist sages,
Sitting in groups below stupendous pagodas,
With an expression of serenity on all faces,
Try to ignore a recent, unusually durable fart.*

A handful are genuinely haunting, particularly those which survey the landscape. They have a cryptic mysticism about them and are cloudy with a nice whisper of immanent knowledge withheld—"The host and the stone smile knowingly at each other"—but, *en masse*, to take a metaphor from over the way, you can't make Mount Fuji out of 501 mole-hills.

SHIVA NAIPAUL

Beyond the Dragon's Mouth

'Beautifully written... highly entertaining... an unstrained combination of informative account and personal anecdote'
Ian Hislop, *The Listener*

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Anthony Burgess, *Observer*

Hamish Hamilton £12.50

¹¹ *Leviathan*. By B. C. LEALE. Allison & Busby, £3.95.

¹² *A Bad Day for the Sung Dynasty*. By FRANK KUPPNER. Carcanet, £4.95.

Allen Curnow

Do Not Touch the Exhibits

A gulp of sea air, the train
bites off a beach, re-enters the rock.
A window, a blind cathode, greyly reflects,
Plato sits opposite, his nose in a map.
Where you're going's never what you see

and what you saw, was that where you went?
Is there a reef with an angler on it
whose rod makes a twitching U?
Has he landed his fat silver-gilt
dorado, smack! on a pan in the mind?

Why can't I cut corners and have them?
Daylight chips in again, with cypresses,
olives, loquat (*nespola* the Japan
medlar, not the one you eat rotten,
the other sort, butter-yellow, sweet

embedding slippery outsize pips),
artichokes, the native littoral
cultivations, rivermouth litter,
punctured cans, plastic bottles,
and behind (supposedly) the weatherish

pink and chrome villas gingerly
seated, shutters to seaward,
the Ligurian blue, too much of it.
Or weathering the long cape
another fisherman whose limping

boat I'm overhauling? a file
of red and white Martini sunbroillies
wheels in, peels off, drops back.
A brace of NATO frigates present
unmuzzled guns, "optional extras."

Beachcombings, introjections,
best stuffing for tunnels. Venus
on her lee-shore *poco mosso*
paroled from the Uffizi, screwed
to the wall under the baggage rack,

space reserved in the mind, goes
where I go, my side of the glass
beneath which our family motto's pinned,
è pericoloso sporgersi
indelibly incised on steel.