

# The Sweet Dance

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Matthew Sweeney, *Sanctuary*, Cape, £9, ISBN 0224073451  
Sinéad Morrissey, *The State of the Prisons*, Carcanet, £6.95, ISBN 1857547756  
James J. McAuley, *New and Selected Poems*, Dedalus, £10.95, ISBN 1904556355

If one had to draw the co-ordinates for Matthew Sweeney they might intersect about the point where Flann O'Brien met Marin Sorescu, though without the latter's more intimate knowledge of bloodiness and tyranny. And there might be the ghost of a flute or pennywhistle there too, because it is impossible to read his poetry without hearing its apparently simple but sophisticated cadences as music.

In fact the music is probably the most important aspect of his poetry. His short anecdotal runs of whimsy-cum-unease are less to do with subject matter or with incident than with pitch. At best they communicate a kind of blessedness like a drunk man dancing along a tightrope.

It is not an easy act to pull off. The balance between whimsy and unease is delicate, and cultivating it does not necessarily make for lightness, or rather it can make for the wrong kind of lightness in which all the clarity, and all the music, remains but somehow the counterbalance of unease is left lying by the roadside and the tightrope walker falls off. There are some poems in Sweeney's new book, *Sanctuary*, that seem thus unburdened and thus a bit lopsided. 'Swim' for instance:

The skinhead sniggered  
As the duck he had just plucked  
Waddled to the lake.

This is the complete poem. Certainly, it's a haiku and it has some fun with sounds, but it seems rather insubstantial to me, an idea going nowhere significant. And there are others a little like this; longer poems that sway towards us with a certain assurance but then vanish once you get too close.

Then there are poems that dance that old tightrope prettily – but put the foot down a bit hard at the end. One lovely poem, 'UFO', describes a child's experience in Ireland where a UFO lands in the garden. Really it's a poem about the child's relationship with his grandfather and the sense of "alien splendour", where "a copper kettle boiled / away from the fire, / and my grandfather took me / out to the turfhouse / to see the thing being fed..." And all this is rather beautiful and balanced. But the poem's closure ("[...] I closed

my eyes, / stuck fingers in my ears / and cried”) seems a little too final, a little too self-conscious, especially with the last line all by itself. It is antithetical to Sweeney’s own sense of lightness.

Sometimes a poet can take his own gifts a little too much on trust. But there are some very good poems here too, material and manner dancing their sweet dance in properly Sweeneyesque fashion. And top Sweeney is light but haunting.

The power of Sinéad Morrissey’s poetry lies in sharply pitched precise emotion and a fine ear and eye for texture. The beauty of her short poems is keening, compact and yet airy. Two poems on facing pages of her new book *The State of the Prisons*, ‘Lullaby’ and ‘Conrail’ sum this up. This is ‘Lullaby’:

When I can’t sleep, you speak to me of trees.  
Of the bald-eyed Eucalyptus  
that flared in your back yard  
like an astounded relative –  
pointing to the honey bees in their rickety hives  
your brother had abandoned.

Sometimes the tree was avuncular.  
Arch with its secrets.  
How it boasted, on days  
your mother  
hung sugarwater,  
the delicate surgery of hummingbirds.

The tone of intimacy is immediately established then shifts twice, through two highly active lines about the Eucalyptus (*bald-eyed, flared*), to a startling simile. Now we are in family-anecdotal land of the kind often found in Sweeney. The second verse continues the family theme, extending the identification of tree with family, but ends in a surprising, wholly discovered image that shifts the poem and launches it off into the unknown, with the lightest of closures so you’d hardly notice anyone had gone out. Despite the active language that constitutes elements of the texture, points at which the mind and eye move fast, there is a surprising spaciousness about the poem that holds its main subject in easy syntactic structures while fluttering away like mad in the analogous imagery, seeking something, then finding it.

Morrissey also works on longer set pieces, such as an attractive series of travel pieces about China (“[...] town after coal-dusted town / stream by in the rain”), in which she plays with form as well as with tone, ending on a nice childlike throwing up of hands at the sheer size of the project. Her feeling for

the grip, hammer and drift of language is excellent. (“I want to hap you up // So that you stagger off [...]”) However, I am not sure if her title poem, about the prison reformer John Howard, is her best work. It seems a little literal to me, perhaps even a touch over-methodical in its performance: unusual for a poet of such sharpness and concision. There are poetic effects and good lines in a narrative that could, I feel, be better told as prose. Morrissey is violin rather than church organ.

I am sorry not have come across James J. McAuley’s poems before. There would have been time, but he has spent years in America and returned to Ireland only in 1998, having been, as Paula Meehan so nicely puts it in her introduction, “ripped untimely from the bars off Grafton Street”. She goes on to remark that the fifties did not end in Ireland until the end of the seventies. McAuley was born in 1936 and left Ireland in 1966, when the fifties were still going strong. His poetry has breathed North American air since then, and there are elements of late Yeats, Frost and early Lowell in his straight, handsome, formal verses (“The air of an old song’s in my head” begins one of the best of his mid-seventies poems, ‘After the Blizzard’).

If Sweeney is pipe and Morrissey violin, then McAuley is a deeper hunting horn sound. It’s a masculine kind of verse: its grandeur is direct, the emotion clear and deepening, the manner verging on perfectly credible bardic. He has a very good ear, so he doesn’t become trapped in post-Yeatsian cadences but probes intelligently, lengthening or shortening the line so as to ease off the grand style. Now and then I think, particularly in poems with a religious or political theme, he pushes too hard at an open door (the mantra of our period must be *lightness*), but that’s a matter of taste. Few would now write a line like, “Was it Onan made him vain, pale?”. Classical euphemism is not a natural resource for the times but his poems about family have a grace and beauty that is noble without any trace of awkward classicising. The tighter the form the better he often is, such as in ‘Rondel’:

After argument the words slow down.  
You, the accused, are revealed as innocent,  
And I, the judge, must toss aside my gown,  
After argument.

But I’d like to know exactly what you meant  
By that last term of endearment – I must be *shown*.  
*Move* to appeal! Your words misrepresent

The case, whatever you say – and it’s well known  
The naked truth will make this judge relent...

Or at least reduce the sentence to a frown,  
After argument.

Out of some minor matter comes a beautifully made toy to present to the “you” of the poem. The diction slightly grand, it is, nevertheless, as the baker in Raymond Carver’s story says: *a small good thing*. A human thing.

George Szirtes was awarded the 2005 T. S. Eliot prize for *Reel*.

