

Anticyclone Isobars

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Seán Rafferty, *Poems, Revue Sketches and Fragments*,

Etruscan Books, £9.50, ISBN 1901538311

John Stammers, *Stolen Love Behaviour*,

Picador, £8.99, ISBN 0330433865

Tony Hoagland, *What Narcissism Means to Me: Selected Poems*,

Bloodaxe Books, £8.95, ISBN 1852246898

After reading his collection, I'm puzzled at Rafferty's neglect by the machinery of literary reputation-making, as his work is often compellingly good. Born in Dumfriesshire in 1909, by the late 1920s he was drawing praise from his contemporary Sorley MacLean for "his brilliance in the Hugh Selwyn Mauberley manner of Pound". In 1932, MacDiarmid called him "the most promising (if not the only) 'modernist' poet amongst us". The poems develop from the Poundian echoes of the 1929 'Return to Wittenberg' sequence to the idiosyncratic modes of later work.

The metrical energy and communicative directness of the border ballad tradition is something of a constant throughout. His verse is already edging towards it behind the Mauberley mask of 'Return to Wittenberg':

The platitudes of lilac and of rose
Wearied him, arid the slick
Competence of sun and moon.
Horizons tightened round his neck.

The next poem in the book, 'The Red Laird Speaks Out', goes straight into full ballad stride. Its sanguine directness, edge of quirky humour, and simple excellences of rhyme and metre are frequent in much that follows:

I am the laird of Middleshaw
although I gang this gait
a house a byre two fields a copse
a meadow my estate,
my two hill fields are stone and whin
and fire from bush to bush
a marigold my meadow
between the tufts of rush.

Some of the work here collected was written for performance and it is in

the dialogue pieces that Rafferty's modernist allegiances are often clearest. The Eliot of 'Sweeney Agonistes' lurks behind the disjunctive conversations and syncopated rhythms of 'Maidenhead Revisited' and 'A Serious Thing'. Mordantly effective yet constantly evasive, they valuably extend the range of the book. So too does the richly-imagined free verse account of street acrobats in 'On July 13th', an *homage* to Apollinaire. Elsewhere there is plenty of the offhand satirical swagger typified by 'Said I to my familiar ghost ...' and a fullness of halcyon lyricism exemplified in 'Tumbledown Songs'. Rafferty is definitely worth getting to know.

John Stammers's poetry is notable for the success with which he raids the hitherto inarticulate. Much of his work explores the before, during and after of love relationships. Reaching into the silent interstices of self and other, he brings forth remarkably clear and accessible poems, complex in development, sometimes urgent in feeling and always underpinned by an elegant objectivity of tone. With few exceptions, he avoids regular verse forms, the imaginative pressures running through his lines and stanzas modulating the form and music of the work. The poems' success lies in the balance they strike between intense subjectivity and the fullness with which the imagery presents the world. 'Younger', the opening poem, carries the weight of loss that the book conveys recurrently, but Stammers's imagination characteristically defies emotional gravity as he revisits the luminous past:

I stood in the front of the big studio-window
and thought I could really see
the hyper-bright air, the warm days roll in,
the anticyclone isobars
drawn languidly across the southern hemisphere of my life.

'Closure' is his hardest-hitting treatment of love's endings, a nine-part sequence of afternoons and mornings through which a marriage falls to pieces. The rawly quotidian detail and plain language that prevail are mediated by the tentative lyricism of a meditation on a photograph of the speaker's parents. "A couple of adulterers", they "grin back at the camera", unknowingly prefiguring their son's predicament. Although man, and woman, hand on misery enough in the collection, it has keenly affirmative and celebratory dimensions. The poems with Italian and American settings are wonderfully responsive to light and provide a strain of exotic opulence. 'La Siesta' demonstrates the power of such imagery in moving from its tragic answer to the question "What is the Earth?" towards the celebratory recognition of life's generosity,

when in clear altering situations
the land exhales the somnolence
of not knowing the source of one's fatigue,
while the blue sky pulses like an hallucination
and fruit follows fruit on the white tables
and great windows, set ajar, cool
in the semi-light [...]

On the lighter side, 'I Don't "Go Organic" Often but When I Do' is an inventive comedy of culinary manners characteristically bright with colourful sensuality of imagery. It ends with "I do not always know what I am doing", indicating the way these poems are so often from the edges of what we know about ourselves yet firmly grounded in common experience.

What Narcissism Means to Me is Tony Hoagland's first UK collection, bringing together three volumes published in the USA (1990, 1998, 2003). His tone is often discursive, distinctly American, and always deftly directed towards each poem's purposes. He can be disarmingly informal and knows well how to amuse and entertain, but sheer candour and the acuteness of his concerns prevent him from ever seeming casual. Henry Shukman is right on the money in the blurb quote when he speaks of Hoagland's "aggressive moral intelligence". He *boldly goes* all right, confronting topics that include race, gayness and AIDS with an instinct for getting at truth that makes political correctness squirm. The book's title is a self-effacing hook for the intensely subjective impulses behind many of his poems, but, like Stammers, he makes the world vividly apparent, even in metaphorical expositions of selfhood:

How did I come to believe in a government called Tony Hoagland?
with an economy based on flattery and self-protection?
and a sewage system of selective forgetting?
and an extensive history of broken promises?

What did I get in exchange for my little bargain? What did I lose?
Where are my natural resources, my principal imports,
and why is my landscape so full of stony ridges and granite
outcroppings?

The poems cover a wide range, successfully negotiating such major themes as the condition of contemporary America and frequently returning to moving treatments of love and mortality. Many get off to an unspectacular anecdotal start and end up surprising the reader with how much has been mined from incident and reflection. Hoagland is gifted at

making accumulations of detail flower suddenly into completed poems and his best effects are large, not conveniently quotable. The voice we hear throughout is invariably clear, engaging, and often slightly acerbic in its avoidances of acceptable half-truths and worse.

Douglas Houston's third collection is *The Welsh Book of the Dead* (Seren, 2000).

