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Opening Extract from...

The Best British Poetry 2012

Edited by Sasha Dugdale

Published by Salt Publishing

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THE
BEST
BRITISH
POETRY

2012



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2012



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SALT

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FOREWORD

by Roddy Lumsden



The poems presented in this volume were selected from UK-based poetry magazines, literary journals and online publications issued between spring 2011 and spring 2012. The main purpose of this volume is to celebrate the thriving scene of literary magazines and the developing sphere of literary sites online. For the past year, Sasha Dugdale and I have been reading these publications as they appeared, seeking poems which we felt should be reproduced here. Though I made recommendations, the choices were ultimately up to Sasha, as this year's Guest Editor. The format of the book owes a debt to The Best American Poetry series of anthologies which was founded in 1988. Similar volumes appear each year in Canada, Australia and Ireland. I would like to thank the series editor of BAP, David Lehman for his advice on editing the series. Both Sasha and I would have liked to include Denise Riley's excellent and moving poem 'A Part Song', certainly one of the year's poetic highlights; however the work's length (it consists of twenty sections) was an issue and we did not feel an extract would do it justice.

INTRODUCTION

by Sasha Dugdale



Best British Poetry is an anthology of single poems, and in this it is like the celebratory annual *Forward Book*. One important difference between the two anthologies is that in this book the poets are asked to write a passage about the poem. How they do this is left to them – it can be an astonishingly literal thing, or a piece of poetic prose. This seems to me to be in its own way revolutionary: instead of an editor's introduction, in which the learned editor opines at length on the state of the nation's poetry and presents a few of his chosen poets to reinforce his views, the introduction is divided into seventy or more smaller introductions, each as fascinating as the next, and none presuming to speak on more than the poet actually knows.

The other very attractive quality of this anthology is the ease with which it moves between style, school and generation in order to present a touchingly communal portrait of contemporary poetry. This is particularly striking when you read through the commentaries. It is almost possible to imagine yourself at a very large and amicable poetry symposium, where everyone reads, speaks and listens in turn. Some of these poets live at the corners of the land, others in the centre, some do not travel, others never stand still: the gathering is quite utopian, and yet whilst you read, it does in fact take place.

The poems here were taken from magazines and we made efforts to read as broad a selection of magazines as possible. Magazine editors therefore played a large part in the compilation of this anthology, and as most of their work is 'on-a-shoestring, burning-the-candle-at-both-ends' labour of love, I would like to acknowledge them, their taste and integrity. We took work from some of the more established poetry magazines, like *Poetry Review* and *Poetry London*, but we also took poems from a variety of smaller magazines and online magazines, like *Clinic*, *10th Muse*, *Halfcircle*, *the Delinquent* and *New Linear Perspectives*. Poetry is a democratic genre, and it is always heartening to witness the plurality of small cultures within the larger poetry scene, and the ways in which poets move between the cultures. There is no sense in imposing any sort of hierarchy on the world

of poetry: the smallest magazine, and the least known author, can publish a poem of such revelatory force that it takes its place alongside the greats. But some magazines, like *Poetry London*, manage the feat of publishing a constant stream of excellent and diverse poems and deserve their large following.

A common criticism of contemporary poetry is that it recedes into the personal anecdote and there was a fair amount of poetry in many of the magazines, which displayed this flabby obsession with the details of a life, failing to transform them into anything more than the sum of their parts. Another weakness in some of the poetry we read was an unthinking use of language, resorting to clichés, or misusing idiom inadvertently. I read any number of helpful articles in the magazines over the year, warning would-be writers to avoid such faults, but the basic line is that poetry requires a degree of discipline and an obsessiveness which we do not all possess in equal measure, and many may not be prepared to surrender themselves to its sometimes destructive force.

However, the poems here display no such weaknesses. They are all written by poets at the top of their game, and they deserve the title 'Best British Poetry'. The 'B-word', as Roddy put it in last year's introduction, is no favourite of mine, but take it in the spirit in which it is meant: these are poems worth reading, not the only poems worth reading, but a very good start, if you weren't able to spend, like us, long hours in the Poetry Library last year. A large anthology like this one merely hints at the variety of the scene, rather than placing a deadening stamp of approval on a few poets' foreheads.

The commentaries on the poems are various but they share an extraordinary degree of erudition, of reference to and resonance with the language and the past. This generation, as every generation, depends on the complex past for its voice, and the breadth of style and colour in the poems is matched by an equal breadth of rootwork. Even apparently straightforward narrative and observation, such as the narrative in Patience Agbabi's 'Unfinished Business', is a study of Chaucer and film noir, or Hilary Menos's 'Bob's Dogs' which is a homage to R.S. Thomas's poems. Poetry never exists in a vacuum, we are all constantly in a fine negotiation with the past, but this group of poems seems particularly rich in allusion.

There are other themes and threads which run through the selection, although these may simply be my own preoccupations, and so particularly visible to me. Preeminent amongst these is poetry of place and poetry about specific landscapes. Some of these places, like John Gohorry's Coventry and Andrew Greig's Fife are powerfully particular urban or provincial landscapes, others, like Karen McCarthy Woolf's skilful setting of her Grandfather's London speech or Christine de Luca's Shetlandic 'Discontinuity', are rooted by means of dialect. Some, like Rory Waterman's

‘Marstrand’, use carefully observed place to unsettling effect. ‘A Local Habitation’, David Constantine’s poem from *The Rialto*, sums up this dedication to locality, the poet is ‘ingrown’, a love of place so intense that it hurts desperately to remember the place lost. Many of these landscapes themselves, under such exacting scrutiny, assume a mythical shape, they are more than just sodden fields, lanes, waterways, industrial estates – they become for an instant glimpses of promised lands, or lands haunted by the past. Through landscape many of the poems reach out to the old matters of time passing and death.

A final count of poets revealed that this anthology has more women poets than men. I should say that I was not aware of gender balance, and when Roddy and I were choosing poems I often didn’t check who had written the poem. Still there is a long history of imbalance in poetry anthologies. *The New Poetry* (1962) appears to have had no British women poets in it, and the first series of *Penguin Modern Poets* included three women out of eighty-one poets, so I don’t feel much anguish at our slightly skewed selection.

I was very keen to include the work of some poets who lived and worked in Britain but did not write in English and I was lucky to come across the work of Yang Lian and Amarjit Chandan in translation. Then there was the lyrically rich music of David Morley’s Romani version of Lorca’s ballad. But there is no doubt that we need to be more aware of the British writers who write in other languages and whose experiences may bring much to our poetic culture. That perhaps is my only request to editors: to actively search out the unheard non-English voices in British poetry. Now that would be a utopian meeting!

We did have a strong sense that the poems we had gathered had a meaningful co-existence as a single volume and said something collectively about the health of British poetry. I can’t make any more claims for this little book, although I’ve read it through a few times now and I see that all the poems have integrity and distinctiveness and that vitality of language which is indicative of the best poetry.

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Bees' Nest



Bumble-, not honey-; and not a hive.
Ignore those trim little boxes, fitted
with a glass inner lid for viewing
and an entry tunnel of the right gauge,
in friends-of-the-planet catalogues.

Such things may do the trick for blue tits,
with their predictable minds. This bee
won't be invited into your parlour.
She'll build in your compost heap; she'll squat
in a disused mouse-hole; or she's

a cross noise buzzing inside the lawn
so that you desist from using clippers,
and an ever-larger moss-thatched skull
rises from the earth like the Green Man,
his head crowning, being slowly born.

With luck it will be in a summer
rich with visitors, so that a child
may find herself transfixed by a procession
of bees, all in the house uniform,
popping out of the grass, just like that,

to go browsing in the buddleia
or shove their snouts into yellow toadflax,
until they or their clone-kin zoom back
unerringly to the secret trapdoor
that gives access to their waxen dome.

But you worry that you haven't enough
flowers in your garden to feed them,
and that being more rare now they'll never
come back after this year's nest has sagged
into ruin. And they don't come back.

from *Poetry London*

Unfinished Business



Conveniently, cowardice and forgiveness look identical at a certain distance. Time steals your nerve. 'Memento Mori', Jonathan Nolan

That night, it rained so hard
it was biblical. The Thames sunk the promenade,
spewing up so much low life.
It's a week since they beat up my wife,
put five holes in my daughter. I know who they are.
I know why. I'm three shots away from the parked car
in a blacked-out car park. My wife cries,
Revenge too sweet attracts flies.
Even blushed with bruises she looks good. She's lying
on the bed, next to me. *Honey, I'm fine.*
Tonight I caught her, hands clasped, kneeling,
still from a crime scene.
I didn't bring my wife to Gravesend for this.
What stops me, cowardice?
None of them, even Joe, has the right to live.
How can I forgive?

How can I forgive
none of them? Even Joe has the right to live.
What stops me, cowardice?
I didn't bring my wife to Gravesend for this
still from a crime scene.
Tonight I caught her, hands clasped, kneeling
on the bed next to me. *Honey, I'm fine.*
Even blushed with bruises she looks good. She's lying.
Revenge too sweet attracts flies
in a blacked-out car park. My wife cries.
I know why. I'm three shots away from the parked car

put five holes in my daughter. I know who they are.
It's a week since they beat up my wife,
spewing up so much low life
it was biblical. The Thames sunk the promenade
that night, it rained so hard.

from *Poetry Review*

Stag-Boy



He enters the carriage with a roar –
he clatters in wildly and fills up the carriages with heat,
running through the train, staining the floor
with hooves dirty from the street;
tearing at the ceilings with his new branched horns,
banging his rough sides against the seats and
the women, who try to look away: Gallant!
He sings hard from his throat,
his young belling tearing at his chest,
pushing at his boy-throat.

Stag-boy –

the train's noise hums in his ears,
sharp and high like crickets pulsing
in the tall grass,
and he wounds it with his horns,
maddened like a stung bull,
pushing up his head,
pushing up his mouth for his mother's teat:
Where is her beestings?
Where is the flowered mug she used to warm his milk in?

No good, no good now.

He's smashing out of the train door,
he's banging his hooves in the industrial air,
he's galloping through the city squares,
and drinking from a vandalised spring –

And still his mother walks through the house,
crying: *Stag-boy, oh stag-boy come home!*

from *Modern Poetry in Translation*

Sow



‘Dainty footwear turns a young lady into an altogether more beautiful creature . . .’ —*Etiquette for Ladies*, ELIZA SELL

Trottering down the oss road in me new hooves
I’m farmyardy sweet, fresh from the filth
of straw an swill, the trembly-leg sniff
of the slaughter wagon. A guzzler, gilt.
Trollopy an canting. Root yer tongue beneath
me frock an gulp the brute stench of the sty.

I’ve stopped denying meself: nibbling
grateful as a pet on baby-leaves, afeared
of the glutton of belly an rump. I’ve sunk
an when lads howd out opples on soft city palms
I guttle an spit, for I need a mon
wi a body like a trough of tumbly slop
to bury me snout in.

All them saft years of hiding at ’ome
then prancing like a pony for some sod to bridle
an shove down the pit, shying away
from ’is dirty fists. All them nights,
me eyes rolling white in the dark when the sow I am
was squailin’ an biting to gerrouit.

Now no mon dare scupper me,
nor fancy-arse bints, for I’ve kicked the fence
an I’m riling on me back in the muck,
out of me mind wi gruntin pleasure,

trotters pointing to the heavens like chimney pots,
stickin V to the cockerel
prissy an crowing on 'is high church spire.

from *Poetry London*

Black Country glossary

oss road: *street*; gilt: *sow*; canting: *cheeky or saucy*; guttle: *cheur*;
saft: *foolish*; squalin: *squealing or crying*; bints: *derogatory slang for girls*; riling: *writhing*

Roll-on



Sweat is not fashionable. My father said
before deodorants, how people stank.
His infant teacher, built like a small tank,
would loom in her stout blouse above his head.
Though honeysuckle blew, the village went
into one private cave of hot, sharp scent.

No one could love the sour reek of the Tube,
its summer greeting, the warm winds of hell.
Some riders walked, until the heatwave fell,
turned bearable. But vans still speed, goods move,
and I am startled when the drivers come
dry-skinned, with aftershave a low, harsh hum.

Horses sweat, men perspire and ladies glow.
But I am drenched, breasts, thighs and thinning skull,
till wind streams over and my body cools.
Earth turns on heat, despite the drugstore's show.
The goods are packed, the stable swept. And I
drink in the rain, which is the sweat of sky.

from *The North*

Four Departures from 'Wulf and Eadwacer'

◇ ◇ ◇

(i) reverse

It takes nothing from you that I have him –
 Bunched up in your ruins, you cannot lose.

He works alone.

Two sides of one city hide us.
Things fall apart, worked roads recoiling.
 Your lot would siphon grey from graveyards.
 Bunched up in your ruins, you cannot lose.

He works alone.

Near him I narrow to survival mode, wink out;
cannot say the time the place the mood,
hardly the aspect or the gender; again
we did nothing, we did nothing.

Could he for once be nobody's business –
 All too brightly meaningful
 ringbound dossiers flashing their backs,

I reach for the sleep he'd implanted in me;
turn my thorax inside out.

No pen and ink does it justice –
A Stanley knife lullaby score.

(ii) *outside*

‘What was so lacking in the upbringing we gave her that she had to go off with a stranger, one of *them* as well; she’s worthless, no getting her back, but so long as they’re in touch with each other they’re within our reach, for globalisation is also on our side. Their so-called love’s as natural-seeming as the rain that falls with bitter charge, entering through the eardrums of our not-so-young houses to ancestral designs *he* only hopes to repossess. She’s torn – it is transparent – about throwing in her lot with a fancy-passport foreigner whose hyena ways must make her sick. Best not lose sleep over prayers that her bastard will self-destruct in the womb, taking the mother to some lesser mansion in Heaven; never forget she is one of us, after all. A satisfactory solution will be found.’

(iii) *inside*

If the present could be bloodier – can’t imagine how.

Dear Lord, I never intended this.

You were one kind of invasion, and another,
and it won’t stop raining.

‘I gave us all up?’ To him. For him.

Dear Lord, I never intended this.

We made notes only in mud or on pieces of wood
for burning, burnt; for cementing, trampled.
What can you hope to recover?
The nightjar stuck in my throat?