Sea Pie
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A Shearsman Anthology of Oystercatcher Poetry

edited by

Peter Hughes

Shearsman Books
Contents

Introduction 7
John Hall 9
Kelvin Corcoran 11
Emily Critchley 15
Peter Riley 18
Ian Davidson 21
David Rushmer 24
John Welch 27
Maurice Scully 29
Carol Watts 31
Rufo Quintavalle 33
Alistair Noon 35
Lisa Samuels 38
Gerry Loose 40
Allen Fisher 43
Ken Edwards 45
Randolph Healy 46
David Kennedy 48
Alec Finlay 50
Michael Haslam 52
Richard Moorhead 54
Carrie Etter 57
Simon Perril 61
Iain Britton 63
Peter Hughes 66
Anna Mendelssohn 69
Catherine Hales 72
Nathan Thompson 74
Michael Ayres 77
Giles Goodland 80
Sophie Robinson 83
Matina Stamatakis 85
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ralph Hawkins</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigel Wheale</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivano Fermini</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Lehrmann</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete Smith</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Atkins</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip Terry</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.J. Fowler</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alasdair Paterson</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Allen</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Evans</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie Mayer</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John James</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Marsh</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further Reading 124
Introduction

In the spirit of the best English poetry of the past, these poets have opted to move on. They make it new without resorting to gimmicks, make it aesthetically potent rather than merely decorative, and make it contemporary rather than modish.

When you are dealing with the very new, as we are here, the merit of individual works of art is bound to be disputed. Some will be ignored, some dismissed, especially by those still relishing the styles of 1956. But, to paraphrase John James, it wasn’t like 1956 in 1956 either.

This is a period of political regression, and of the erosion of opportunities for independent thought in education, and of the remoulding of ‘consumer tastes’ by multinational corporations. In such circumstances it is easy to underestimate the importance of modern art, which begs to differ.

This book displays a series of choices and procedures which are not determined by ‘what the market thinks’. These are individual writers investigating and imagining what is true now. They are thinking for themselves, and writing for anyone tired of official versions.

Readers will notice that these writers are different from each other and do not constitute a ‘school’. Cultures thrive by means of such diversity, and ‘schools’ are best reserved for children, fundamentalists and whales.

* * *

Oystercatcher Press got off to a good start. The first batch of pamphlets was entered for the inaugural Michael Marks Award and won the publisher’s prize. Ian McMillan, Chair of the judges at that time, praised Oystercatcher for ‘taking risks with older and newer writers from outside the perceived centre of British poetry’. We must admit that this took place.

Since then many individual pamphlets have been singled out for praise in various quarters. At the same time, attempts to define a
‘house style’ have generally been thwarted by a new Oystercatcher pamphlet which seemed to be stylistically located on the other side of someone else’s fence.

I think it dangerous for poems or presses to have too clear an idea of where they are going. Just around the corner is a place which is different from where you have been. And it’s more fun checking out the locals and locale than grumbling about how this is not the same as yesterday and why are there no chips.

I hope all the people enjoy some of these poems most of the time, whilst keeping on the watch for what’s coming up next.

Peter Hughes                                      The Old Hunstanton Vortex

April 2012
pale flames of an unruly sun
rise gingerly over the pillow’s horizon
from an indented arc
corporately they move me, the shape
eye they have, to a colourful
love
hollow for a concealed eye, is there
beauty in our lives? does it enter
golden through the hideous (grubby) curtains
to bounce off familiar surfaces, which we angle
do we, in obeisance for the visit
in our dreams we rolled
steadily through the darkened memories
of recent distress, & colourfully rolled
also what we woke to, a world “new” again
in an antique daily wonder
lights driving a clear way through
high banks of grubbily impending
snow
the changeful sleep dropping brightly
in our lives, moving the opening eye
to some remedy

***
rise gingerly to the edge
of the week
pale ginger hair caught
in the comb, left by the mirror

the Miró painting of the beautiful
lovers left out of this with the same
regret any fine thing we have found

the admired painting not quite hanging
in my imagination against the rather
grubby lime-green wall
the beautiful lovers left in the mire
of recent distress without their
favourite painter, teaching the young
who offer some corporate resistance & what
is famous about the beautiful lovers is
a certain fragility
Kelvin Corcoran

from What Hit Them

From the hen-roost

‘War, one war after another, men start ’em who couldn’t put up a good hen-roost.’

1

Black ships drawn up for ten years
to get an exquisite woman, to get at all the women.

To master trade routes, grain supplies, pipelines of wealth
burning lights of acquisition scored on the map.

Make a poem of it; a bayful of weapons in the sun
a poem; the fertile plain a killing ground unrolled

Runs in every direction—delight in slaughter found
the great host fell upon Asia’s meadowland and marshes.

2

Karl Twitcher out in the field geologises
no water or gold found but thought
there might be oil out here, let’s talk.

Philby bows to the father of his new nation
lips wet from Zamzam, sets about God’s work
the American concession secured.
Osama sits on the banks of the River Gash, wives safely stowed in Khartoum, sings—ain’t gonna study war no more.

At the crossroads of Nejd the Word rose up from the Buner Mountains, the King of the West, farming abandoned to wire the faith.

Osama dreams of smart women, burning towers of Qutb by the waters of Manhattan of an old bitch gone in the teeth.

Every grain of sand becomes a gem, and Lord—Israel’s tents do shine so bright, Aramco on the tribal mat, afloat in the Gulf.

3

We had thought them easy meat for jackals, leopards, wolves but now . . . across the moat on high ground Trojans reaping.

It came down hard on us what if we pull out, wait off shore? the rampart breached, Europe stranded by the ships, politicians at the old business.

They go licking up the paid, fat words in a greased circuit of ignorance; gods in bliss in Houston and Riyadh granted the power of massacre.
My brothers dropped in to the sleep of bronze, their accents mapping the poor cities of an indifferent country, as they leaked into the ground.

Breathing long alcohol afternoons he might tell me about the war, thick layers of it. The stories thick as beer and rum breath and I still don’t know the truth, the final version. He volunteered himself out of the Free State and poverty to cross the Irish Sea, the gulf of sad song misery, for the spit-shine British Army. Out of what? I don’t know.

He was shipped out to India and off to fight in Burma with the forgotten 14th. He went on about the filth, the child prostitutes, just girls waiting in alleyways with men shouting the prices. Bored, they would set traps for kites, tie bread with string and allow the birds to swoop down, swallow the bread and fly off, then yank them out of the sky and kill them.

They were half buried in jungle tracks, tunnels of festering vegetation without names, and the stacked humidity just makes you rot—and then, Jesus, the bloody insects at you, at you, all the time—and on top of that the Jap bastards trying to fucking shoot you for free.

And if men like him had not gone to it?

I don’t know what they made of their fear; dark bird hovering there for years, just out of vision, ready to slide off the air, dive and tear and shred; one of Chadwick’s beasts would do, sharp eyed, clawed. Armitage could identify the model; outline its shape, as it ghosts in and out of the mind for decades.
And Thatcher’s nasty little war
and Blair’s nasty rented wars,
at some point they believe
then retire to revelation on the Red Sea.

We hear their voices like ghosts on the air,
the false tone burning, smeared on a nation.

May their houses be drowned in black dust.
May their words be as waves of dead locusts.
May their fake empire be struck dumb.
And may the names of the dead be made real to them.

The bay empties itself, the deep-sea ships sail away
Homer doesn’t cover this, if he did I would rewrite it.

The boy looked out to sea, it was empty, he was astonished
—nothing on the radar, just static, just radiation ghosts.

Peace like a white vision, bees murmur in the marram,
and light paints the surface of the whole world.

Somewhere, ships low on the water, take cover,
their discrete weaponry a design feature.

Somewhere, rewritten—speedboats take a punt at the Cole,
Odysseus already dreams of Ithaka pitching under his feet.

And the elemental gods flatten the rampart
as if nothing ever happened here.
Emily Critchley

from Who handles one over the backlash

Waiting

to force these intensities to a shape, to burst
or dilate. Body without cause, so detailed, so collate
and threaded, you find yourself together making verbal patterns,

visual attachments, which you can’t unless willing
an escape. If you compere, all concepts can be made concrete,
released suddenly, a movement in commonplace, maybe over

your head. Like I’ve been searching suddenly all over
for justification. Dicing through bends in the time.
It’s suddenly a wall of laughter—warping occasion

on a determined fault line. Or, we are all attached
anyway. Not the same as attack. Bent on understanding,
see? It will curve us as we lean it out. The response

which was so automated, so confused, is more like
keeping up chance, smirched now in the
temperature of the room. High order, it was heady

lately. You had to be there to experience. And even though
one left early, odd throbbing away, ready to hatch.
And though you lay your ear very close to the side of it,

which side have you taken? Responsive or servile?
Others’ needs don’t curb in the place used to blast
others’ intentions for. Can it be generous while qualifying
embrace? The area is warm where thought pounds on it, day after day, bending pale green shade afterwards. That’s unclear. Or maybe the eye which makes light of or sense anyway
↓
↓
↓

Road Accident

Who handles one over thegap & thecrash?

When it’s all over,
cut from it & grab wilting over some warm desire: metal: the wish of it. Trailed salt cuticle draped from an edging. Nobody’s inched perfectly along.

Behind thepowerfulwreck, just your soft outline bruised hedged-in dripped formatting. Not least before.

But that was a shame not to will it goodbye.

Well more important wait on at the ploughed skyline. Eyes up —reddened on both sides for the ride.
Could’ve told one as good as new.
Could’ve stuck to the sideline.
Like reliefs—
marbled in signia: little swan’s nests on 1000 or so mini oceans.

Out there where a drunk’s faltering & spitting,
1 time out of 10 will there actually do something.

Others, smell it, thefear.
Warm engines pump out their love of the ether.

What cry,
what does it matter gathering hurt to itself?
Waste drips all over every one is
ruined fields
of no fault but their own.
PETER RILEY

from Best at Night Alone

(after Deguy)
Singing old songs together in the evening
like nomads round the camp fire. The rare
moment when we agree to die
It is Orpheus, it is the soft thing stronger
than stone, stronger than tree or
scattered creatures, the song in its clearing
as one by one we stand and leave
in good order by the law of random numbers.

They have all gone to bed and left me here.
Singing old songs together in the evening.

***

Questions in my hair like midges, buzzing and
getting lost among trees and fading to distance.
Mars, Venus, dusk on earthen spring,
the great fruiting vastness beyond these walls
all the people living their lives and I cannot address
less than that, some favour or dream. Only you listen
are my opening eye, piercing the lights.
Venerable honeyed lips, bitter wine.
Earth’s glories pass away.

***

Darkness is not a human condition
but a condition of the earth, that renders us
isolated and uniquely empowered at
a turning point and if we are quick and careful
before the light returns in the silence when
people sleep because they think there is nothing to see
there we can reverse the world’s drift by
a spasm of thought carried across several mountains
like fire in a fennel stalk. And a bluish paleness
from the night horizons.

***

_Ekelöf in 1932_
I shan’t sleep tonight.
Forgive me if I write badly.
Forgive me if I write stupidly.
Death was ignored, and sat there
like some hapless employee.

The bands of night enwrap the house
the wind hisses on the gables
the circular graveyard
turns slowly in the night.
If I am wrong, forgive me.

Memory of a plume of thought
brushing down the hillside like snow
announcing the human victory
and purpose bursts out of enclave.
He got up and opened the window.

***

All I ever wanted, a hand touches a wooden table.
And there is nothing to pay, looking at the hills
Through the window and hearing a faint cry from
The cradle, remembering a carved stone at Southwell
Of intricately entwined leafage: somebody was capable
Of setting aside the world’s catalogue of ills
And I wanted a lot more than that, a cat’s dream
In a quiet basket, of the great fix, the claw in harm.

The claw passes through air and retracts
At the delicate stone edge, the world stands,
It stands alone, not knowing what it wants,

An élite or egalitarian structure. Call it home,
Let it settle round us and hope the wild fires don’t
Reach it. There’s nothing else either to want or own.

***

These hearts always at war,
Twenty years day and night.

O Earth you don’t listen, you don’t understand,
You don’t speak when you see me dying.
O Earth you don’t protect your children,
You don’t lead them home from the killing fields
You just cry and cry.

Damn these years always at war.
Damn the liars who speak of community.