

summer seeming cool but “tacky as bare thighs on a vinyl chair”, bushfire flames “as tall as office blocks”, as do strange juxtapositions of adjective and noun, the “white panache” of the gannets, “wind-slow yachts”.

This is part of Edgar’s attractiveness as a poet. We may hesitate on reading, for example, the self-contradiction in “down Time’s long labyrinthine avenue”. Then we reflect on the ease with which lovers’ paths might twist and are reminded that while such meetings feel inevitable, a crossing of avenues, we might easily have missed meeting at all.

His voice is neither European nor American, more exotic than either but not particularly “Aussie”, and firmly in the classical tradition. The world he describes with such clarity and penetration is one in which we also live. He is to be read with pleasure.

OMAR SABBAGH

Norbert Hirschhorn, *Monastery of the Moon* (Dar al-Jadeed, 2012), ISBN 9953-11-04-9, 76 pp, £10 (pb)

Norbert Hirschhorn is both a distinguished physician and a distinguished poet. His third, most recent collection, *Monastery of the Moon* was published this past summer (2012) as the only English-language fare of Dar al-Jadeed, a radical Lebanese publishing house. *Deir Al-Qamar*, “Monastery of the Moon”, is a town in Lebanon’s Chouf mountains, famed for being the home town of one of Lebanon’s most admired historic leaders, Camille Chamoun.

Having recently read all three of his collections, I noticed a certain shift in poetic approach in this new, third volume. While still temperamentally bold, Hirschhorn is more gnomic and, simply put, “difficult” in this third book. The reader is asked to answer for his or herself, to do more of the work of reconfiguration. While in no way a bad

thing, it is a strange pattern to behold: intuitively one tends to think that with age, maturity, distinction, poets tend to become more aesthetically conservative; not so here. We might say that his first two collections (*A Cracked River*, 1999, and *Mourning in the Presence of a Corpse*, 2008) offer more resolution to the nightmare of history and storied experience, while this third one is more modernist in sensibility, healing in an inverse mode, healing by showing the wounds, borne, bare and bloody. And so, what I concentrate on below is the idea of ends and endings, both in the substantive sense and in the formal sense.

One way of describing this new disenchantment I sense in his latest work—given what I read, heuristically, as a Judaic sensibility, a dark humor—is to say that the sacred is achieved by the litany of the profane. A kind of *via negativa*...

In ‘A Physician’s Oath’, we have interpolated the lines from a seeming Hippocratic oath with fragments of stories from political borderlines, such as those of Mexicans or Palestinians. At the end of the poem, his art or vocation as physician transfigures into that of art itself, his poetic calling. The healing of poetry is attested to, then, in a very unromantic world. Or, at the end of the prose-poem piece, ‘Lebanon’, dedicated to Rasha al-Ameer, Hirschhorn’s publisher and distinguished novelist, he writes: “From the soul of her people she makes wine. From their sweat she makes bread and jasmine. So how did it come to taste of smoke and fire?” (The notes tell me that these are borrowed lines from poet Joseph Harb’s ‘*Li Beirut*’ [“to/for Beirut”], famously sung by Lebanese icon Feyrouz.) Thus, Art, physician of the passions, intends to heal, redeem; but does it in fact “matter”? As throughout this collection, the antinomy is not (ultimately) resolved. The whole is an “absent whole”. The God is not quite Himself.

For the sake of parsimony, I continue with this theme of ends and endings *as* either ends and endings, or not as ends and endings. Death, of course, both in terms of empirical life and as a concept, is liminal, aporetic.

In one sense, it's all that exists; in another how can we write of death, being in a position, inveterately, not quite dead?

Take the last stanza of this book. Unlike the five stanzas preceding it, which are quatrains, not quite heroic, the last stanza is (erratically) five lines long, and ends with

in a million years or sooner
 human ruckus will be done
 and earth's air heard but by moon, or
 stars, or newer life-forms yet to come.

This is the close of the book, and it plays with closure, unmakes it just as much as it makes it.

But this radical ambivalence, poetry's itself, poetry as perhaps a "talking cure" or as not quite so, is registered early on in the collection. The paradox of healing is adverted to in a poem titled, 'Nubians Contemplate Lake Nasser behind the High Dam at Aswan'. These famously tall Nubians are designated in the opening line as standing on "concrete pylons". This is both concrete description, perhaps, *and* metaphor. Indeed in this, a sonnet, the turn comes in the opening of a new sentence at the end of the eighth line, with "Only / the water..." That "only" is both one made in logical space (a shift in discourse) and one as it were topographically; its ambivalent position suggesting the (later) "growl of turbines". Form and content are seamless, even uncanny, in their (reflexive) wit.

Perhaps the most powerful poem in this collection, which has a Darwish epigraph intimating the play between exile and home, illness and health, is 'Qaseeda—A Love Song.' The poet opens on a kind of ending, sitting opposite the "departure gate", "laughing, crying with the same breath". Cognate with this, the poem—at times whimsical, at times grave—interweaves intimate lore with a more contextual "history". And the two lovers are "Solitary within our own skins, whispers from prisoner / to

prisoner, mirror facing mirror in an alabaster room, / a lit candle between....” Love as the ultimate healing; and love as the ultimate wound. Exiled from each other (“solitary”) and in colloquy none the less, if by way of mirror to mirror, prisoner to prisoner; both ecstasy, then, and lived catastrophe (perhaps.) And the slightly anachronistic syntax is there, in my view, to suggest the tragedy of that which is the sole recompense from tragedy.

Then again—though a fervent Arabist—for all his hale pathos, Hirschhorn alights on the comic within the finality of the tragic, as though a last resort in some dire Diaspora: “Lie down straight, my mortician said, / I haven’t got all day” (‘Death in Venice.’)

JACKIE WILLS

Penelope Shuttle, *Unsent. New & Selected Poems 1980–2012* (Bloodaxe, 2012), ISBN 978-1-85224-950-2, 270 pp, £12 (pb)

Selima Hill, *People Who Like Meatballs* (Bloodaxe, 2012), ISBN 978-1-85224-945-8, 128 pp, £9.95 (pb)

Deryn Rees-Jones, *Burying the Wren* (Seren, 2012), ISBN 978-1-85411-576-8, 64 pp, £8.99 (pb)

Stephanie Norgate, *The Blue Den* (Bloodaxe, 2012), ISBN 978-1-85224-937-3, 80 pp, £8.95 (pb)

Penelope Shuttle was thirty-three years old when Oxford University Press published her first poetry collection, *The Orchard Upstairs*, in 1981. So three decades of work feed into *Unsent. New and Selected Poems*. Shuttle is an important contemporary poet who claimed the body as her subject in many early poems, notably ‘Act of Love’ and ‘Trick Horse’ along with others about pregnancy, birth, water and landscape. It makes sense, therefore, that she would show the body’s response to grief, and nearly half this book