Emma Danes wins the 2011 Hamish Canham Prize

Emma Danes is the winner of the 2011 Hamish Canham Prize for ‘17’, judged the best members’ poem published in Poetry News last year. She receives a cheque for £350 and a special prize. ‘17’, submitted for last autumn’s Poetry News theme of ‘home’ set by Jane Yeh, was originally written in response to a Cambridge Stanza group challenge. It describes the author’s move from London to Cambridge and, in typically deft and allusive language, manages to convey both the ‘sudden lightening’ Danes experienced in her new home, and the lingering, slightly melancholy, effect of the house she left behind. ‘I was quite worried about moving, having lived in London all my life,’ says Danes. ‘I loved our old Surbiton house, but it didn’t quite seem to belong to us. On the other hand, it was the house in which I’d had two children and all those memories were being left behind. And then there are the unlooked-for undertones that come in, even when I’m not intending to write about them.’ 

Danes, who won the Poetry Society Stanza competition in 2007, described her win as a ‘huge surprise’ but the Canham judges, who have shortlisted her poems in each of the past three years, feel that the prize represents overdue recognition of the consistent high quality of her work. Danes began to produce poetry ten years ago; having always been interested in writing she now finds it difficult to try it. ‘I think it was connected with having a second child, which produced all sorts of new feelings, and a need to find some new way of expressing myself,’ Danes says. She joined the Poetry Society early on ‘because someone told me it was a good way to learn more’ and is now an active member of the Cambridge Stanzas. 

Her interest is informed by a voracious reading habit. ‘I get very excited about new collections coming out and sit in coffee shops, reading them like novels, from cover to cover. Owen Sheers’s Skirrid Hill was one of the first, after I’d so much enjoyed The Blue Book. Recently I’ve also loved Jane Dutan’s Graceless, Anthony Thwaite’s Collected, and Martin Figura’s Whirled, as well as the latest from Jo Shapcott, Derek Walcott and Jackie Kay.’

The concentration of language and thought in her work has developed over time, she says. ‘I like the idea of poetry being dense but not cryptic, though I started out quite wordy and loose.’ Danes has yet to publish her first collection though her poems have appeared in Poetry Wales, Magna, the Templar anthology Buzz, and are forthcoming in The North. She has also been shortlisted for the tall-lighthouse pamphlet competition. ‘I’ve learned so much and I continue to learn all the time. It’s a constant process. Poetry really helps me to see and think in different ways.’

So, will she be spending the money on anything special? ‘I might do an online course or have a manuscript read. I’ll also be spending some of it on taking my family out — without my notebook! They deserve it.’

For Paul McGrane’s report on the judging see p. 3.

SIGNED LIMITED EDITION PRINT OF C.K. WILLIAMS’S POEM ‘WHACKED’

To mark the occasion of the 2011 Poetry Society Annual Lecture, the Society has produced a magnificent limited edition, letterpress print of C.K. Williams’s tour de force poem Whacked! It is signed by the poet with original woodcuts by artist and Daily Telegraph political cartoonist Nicholas Garland. A unique souvenir of this year’s Annual Lecture and the perfect gift for poetry lovers, the print is available to members at a special price of £8.

To buy, complete the coupon on this issue’s carrier sheet or order online at: poetrysociety.org.uk/shop/product/401/
First Ledbury outing for Foyle Poets

Fielding Ronshaugen, Sarah Lucas and Adham Smaar will present a special Foyle Young Poets Celebration Reading, the first of its kind, at the Ledbury Poetry Festival on 2 July. It will be held from 3pm-4pm at the Barge Hall, Ledbury. Tickets £8; visit www.foylepoetry.com

This year’s competition has already attracted a huge response and judges Imtiaz Dharker and Glyn Maxwell are looking forward to the challenge of seeking out the top fifteen poets and 85 commended poets from the ever-growing pack. The young poets remind me of how to have no fear, how to make awe seem cool, how to know nothing again, like the best poets do. I simply know that we will find some born winners,” says Glen.

The Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award is open to writers aged between 11-17 and the deadline for entries is midnight, 31 July 2011. For details, visit www.foyleyoungpoets.org

Virtual Popescu

Members across the country have signed up to a virtual reading group for the 2011 Popescu Prize for Poetry Translated from a European Language into English, presented by the Poetry Society and the Raito Foundation. Each receives a copy of a book from this year’s shortlist in exchange for an online review. Nearly 80 titles representing 25 European languages have been entered this year; the full list is published on the Poetry Society website. Judges Jane Draycott and Saha Dugal will present the shortlist in September. www.poetrysociety.org.uk

Taking a stand with PBS

Carol Ann Duffy hosted Poetry Cuts in London on 5 June, a wonderful evening of poetry to benefit the Poetry Book Society, which has recently had its regular funding withdrawn by Arts Council England, writes PBS Director Chris Halford.

In celebratory mood, 32 poets read, including Carol Ann herself, Gillian Clarke, John Agard, Elaine Feinstein, David Harsent, Hugo Williams, Luke Wright, Caroline Bird and Daljit Nahal, who won the 2010 Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award. Fellow winner Phoebe Power and others. We have been busy spreading the word about opportunities young people can find locally, through our Poetry Map and daily updates on the Young Poets Network Facebook. We have become an active hub through which poetry organisations across the country can share and promote the opportunities they offer young people.

Meanwhile the site continues to help young people setting up their own local poetry network, presenting the Society not only as a leading literary organisation but as an influential arts body. Judith instinctively knew how to make what was good even better, for example presenting the highly successful Annual Lecture in two other cities outside London, and establishing with the South Bank Centre the highly popular National Poetry Day Live event, now in its third year. (Liza Roberts, Marketing Manager)

Populating the Young Poets Network

It has now been almost three months since the Young Poets Network sprang into action to provide support for young people who have won the Foyle Young Poets of the Year competition.

The user-friendly navigation of the site was designed by Tom Chivers and the brilliant visuals created by Andrew Rae (see above), David SParks and others. We have been busy spreading the word about opportunities young people can find locally, through our Poetry Map and daily updates on the Young Poets Network Facebook.

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Judith_barev.jpg

Judith Palmer as-resigned as Director of the Poetry Society on 20 May 2011. The Board of Trustees wishes Judith every success with her future plans and thanks her for her dedication and commitment. Representatives of the Poetry Society staff also wish to pay a tribute to all her achievements during her three years in the job.

When the boss walked in to the office in her first week in charge and said, ‘We’re going to get everyone to knit the world’s largest poem,’ I thought she must be barking; I was wrong. Months later, thousands of knitters all over the world had completed the task and the poem continues to tour UK poetry festivals. Many contributors I would guess, now remember the Poetry Society’s name with fondness for having had the opportunity to participate in such a wonderful project. More innovative ideas followed which seem, in retrospect, to be so obvious and right; only Judith had the energy and courage to pull them off. (Paul McGreane, Membership Manager)

‘Judith’s directorship encouraged the education team to harness the power of poetry in new and ever more exciting ways, with her originality, charm and lateral thinking. She inspired us to stand on the tips of our toes and think big – allowing us to present the Society not only as a popular literary organisation but as an influential arts body. Judith instinctively knew how to make what was good even better, for example presenting the highly successful Annual Lecture in two other cities outside London, and establishing with the South Bank Centre the highly popular National Poetry Day Live event, now in its third year.’ (Liza Roberts, Marketing Manager)

“Judith brought spark, energy, and a tireless engagement to all she put her hand to, be it unrehearsed readings in the Poetry Society during workshops; or instigating projects like Thos North More Often which, in partnership with the Norwegian Embassy, put poetry round the Trafalgar Square tree. She instigated a thorough investigation into the Poetry Society’s history, interviewing older members and poets, and searching out Society memorabilia to help plug our ‘history gap’. She brought valuable new contacts and projects into the Society fold.” (Rebecca Mustajarvi, Projects Coordinator)

“Judith was both exhilarating and startling when the door to Judith’s office would open and she’d come out to say, ‘I’ve had an idea...’ Startling because the ideas often demonstrated a level of ambition that was slightly intimidating to lesser mortals, and exhilarating because we knew they would be created, long and extremely perceptible in terms of presenting the Society not only as a leading literary organisation but as an influential arts body. Judith instinctively knew how to make what was good even better, for example presenting the highly successful Annual Lecture in two other cities outside London, and establishing with the South Bank Centre the highly popular National Poetry Day Live event, now in its third year.” (Liza Roberts, Marketing Manager)

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Caryl Ann Duffy presented the 2010 Ted Hughes Award with the 2010 Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry and a £5,000 cheque at the Savile Club, London, on 24 March. Judges Gillian Clarke, Stephen Raw and Jeannette Winterson selected O’Reilly’s masterly retelling of Aeschylus’ 2,500-year-old play The Persians. The award was founded by Carol Ann Duffy, Hughes and Harrison when writing The Persians. “No, I was following a different trajectory,” O’Reilly says, though she had been keen to observe Aeschylus’s “very precise” poetic schema. “When Aeschylus used the heroic hexameter, I tried to echo this, so as to give some of the language of a modern audience. In the sections where he used prose, I did too.”

Poetry is an important part of her personal hinterland: “I’m Irish and, without trying to romanticise my culture, I do believe there is a form of poetry in the way Irish people handle language – or there was, certainly, in the living mouths of my parents and the way I was reared. There’s a love of language, an intrusion with what it can do – its lyricisms, its brutality – and this came to me through the language around me as I grew up.” John Donne remains a particular favourite: “He’s the poet I loved first and return to most. He and the Metaphysical poets wrote – to my ear, at least – the human voice in movement, full of humour and poignancy.”

O’Reilly’s adventurousness as a writer continues. She has been developing a series of work for disabled and Deaf performers for several years. In Water I’m Weightless: The ‘d’ Monologues will be produced by National Theatre Wales in 2012, as an Unlimited Commission and part of the Cultural Olympiad. The monologues vary in style and form, and include Sign Poetry “I have been involved in disability arts and culture for over twenty years, and with Sign Performance for almost as long,” O’Reilly says. So will the Ted Hughes Award finally allay her anxieties about claims to poetry? “I have always been rather terrified of ‘poetry’ – whatever that may mean,” she admits. ”As a child, I giggled it up and learned, as is so usual in Irish culture, huge swathes of it by heart. Then, somehow in my twenties I became fearful – I wasn’t clever enough to understand poetry, it was something ‘beyond’ me – although I continued to read widely, especially in translation from German, Japanese, Welsh and Thai. My friend the nature poet Chris Kinsey started my repairation into the republic of poetry, chasing away my fears, sharing her work and that of others. Now to be formally addressed as a fellow citizen, and by such luminaries – who I am to disagree?”

For more information on the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry, visit www.poetrysociety.org.uk

TED HUGHES AWARD FOR NEW WORK IN POETRY

The Ted Hughes Award 2011 will begin accepting recommendations from Poetry Society and Poetry Book Society members later in the year. Visit the Ted Hughes Award section of the Poetry Society website to find out more, to see recommendations by previous winners and to get involved in preparing for the launch of the 2011 award. The award was founded by Carol Ann Duffy when she became Poet Laureate in 2009. The £50,000 prize money is funded from the profit on the sale of the laureate traditionally receives from HM The Queen.

Winning moves

Poetry Society members may already be familiar with Emma Dane’s work. She was the winner of our inaugural Stanza Poetry Competition in 2007 and a runner-up the following year. Her poems appear regularly in Poetry News, and she is usually prominent in judges’ minds when the Hamish Canham prize is being selected. So it’s a delight and no surprise that Emma has triumphed at last with a poem that judges agreed was challenging and adventurous, with some stand-out imagery and memorable lines.

Previous commentators on Emma’s poetry have noted her use of sparse, simple language in which the reader slips easily and deceptively. “17”, the judges agreed, is no exception.

We start with a home that “should be a haven, a refuge, a clearing”, cleverly deployed by Emma to describe how the inhabitants need to agree terms with their surroundings, personified as “it”. They tried appeasement but still had “longed to be empty”.

In trying to resolve some of the mysteries within the poem, “17” became a unanimous favourite with the judges: why “cow parsley?” Is the poem about bereavement, a child’s death perhaps? This view is bolstered by language usually associated with sacrifice and ritual – “offered up”, “brought it a child”, “practised”. “While writing this piece, I took a sneak look back at the autumn 2010 issue of Poetry News, where “17” originally appeared. Selector Jane Yeh describes the poem as a “submerged narrative of loss and mourning”). On the other hand, why is there an image of a widowed swan (a creature famed for forming lifelong partnerships) that doesn’t “guard the bruise of her reflection” once the inhabitants have left number 17? Were we digging too deep? Is the poem a tale of a family who have left a poisonous, but not fatal, house for another where it is they, rather than their home, that are “attended upon”? “17” wasn’t without challengers. The judges agreed that three poems in particular were worthy contenders and might have won in other years: ‘Time Capsules’ by Francis Green; ‘Jesse’ by Jane Searle and ‘patriot’, ‘Autumn Peas’. Whilst all of us agreed that each of these poems was finely crafted and successful in its own right, “17” took just enough risks to make it this year’s outstanding winner.

EMMA DANES

“17”

We thought it would be ours – shy-on to the street, inadequate fence, blind corners. We learned it by night – its Braille of angles and doorways, its patriot of rattle and crack.

We dismantled the chimney stack, offered up wiring and roof slates, carpentry. We brought it a child. It blistered with splinters and snagged nails. We practised to be smaller.

It longed to be empty, tethered behind the bus stop in the shade of a constancy of trees. One days we slipped out under the teeth of the lock we’d fitted, arrived where even cow parsley’s lighter – a child’s hands feathered with flour. Postmen and plumbers attend us. In the park, no widowed swan guards the bruise of her reflection.

In the republic of poetry

Alan Ward speaks to Kaiete O’Reilly, winner of the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry

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PHOTO: Polly Clark by Simon Hollington

Sean O’Brien at a launch held at the Creative Process. Forgotten moments and to document these on Open Notebooks, a blog I started scribbling down thoughts in my notebook and taking immediately.

In hindsight, the poems, more as presiding spirits than the subject that you came up with. As it turned out, the prison looked rather than closeness, while ‘The Poet’s Progress’.

Karen McCarthy Woolf’s notebook showing an early draft of ‘Wing’.

As it turned out, the prison looked more like a shabby Victorian tenement block than Alcatraz, and the group at Wormwood Scrubs couldn’t have been more alert and attentive. It comprised fourteen adult men – a demographic you don’t often see in regular poetry workshops!

Karen McCarthy Woolf describes the evolution of her poem ‘Wing’, and the experience of sharing her work with prisoners at Wormwood Scrubs and HMP Downview.

I was reminded that deciding what to read is always something of a guessing game. While the audience at the launch would be broadly familiar, the prison was an unknown quantity. I knew I would read ‘Wing’ from the Review as we had complimentary copies to distribute to prisoners. I also wanted to read my poems from the Bloodaxe anthology Ten New Poets from Spread the Word. However, I did have concerns that a sequence centred around the aftermath of a stillbirth was too intrinsically ‘female’ as a subject for the men. Then again, I reasoned, many probably had families and children from whom they were involuntarily separated, and mortality is, after all, the universal phenomenon.

In the end I decided to go with it and I’m glad I did. There’s a certain vulnerability in sharing autobiographical work and the men were empathetic and forthright in their response. Importantly, I wanted the poems to be accessible to everyone, regardless of whether they read poetry or not. Although I don’t tend towards narrative poems I deliberately selected those that were strong on story.

OOnn eeellvveess...... PPAAGGEE 77

One young woman who kept a notebook at Wormwood Scrubs, many might never have been to a poetry event on the outside. Yet if there’s one place that you feel poetry’s intrinsically intimate qualities could make a palpable difference to people’s lives, it’s in prison.

Karen McCarthy Woolf’s poetry appears in Ten: New poets from Spread the Word (Bloodaxe, 2010). Her blog is www.opennotebooks.co.uk

Send no more than two poems please, each max. 40 lines, typed on A4, with your membership number, not your name and address, at the foot of each. Please include an SAE if you would like poems returned.

OOnly wwhheenn ppoeeettss aanndd ootthheerr aarrttiisstss hhaavvee sseett ttoo wwoorrk ttoo aannaallyyssee
Interrogating the quotidian would raise a quizzical eyebrow at knowing how to fix a computer and Spock technology. Shakespeare wouldn’t be serious about the arts while science mingles more often. Both are concerned with looking at the world in different ways. The relationship between strange and familiar, real and surreal, has been warped and manipulated by both poets and science fiction authors for most of the 20th century. Ever since Craig Raine’s ‘A Martian Sends A Postcard’, the ‘martian’ perspective or of suburban body-snatching (the residents of a village wake up after an unexplained blackout to find their doubles lying beside them), it’s been obvious to some of John Wyndham’s night-invasion conception:

It was gas, we think. Insects and reptiles survived it and most of the birds [...]

Interrogating the quotidian

On closer examination, however, it’s hard to understand why the two don’t mingle more often. Both are concerned with looking at the world in different ways. The exhibition Out of this World: Science Fiction but not as you know it currently at the British Library, London, emphasises science fiction’s propensity to ‘imagine ‘other worlds’, but these are, more often than not, simply a means of reflecting on our own. Poetry, meanwhile, is one of our most powerful microscopes, interrogating the quotidian to find surprising new angles.

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The argument against branding Kennard’s work in particular as science fiction is that while individual lines and details are frequently otherworldly, the ingredients rarely add up to a thematically coherent whole:

“Sometimes the devils are prevalent on earth – and you can barely see the sky for all the brightly coloured sepulchres falling out of their mouths.”

The Explodape.

Indeed, Kennard is intent on repeatedly destabilising his narratives by shifting the scenery, while science fiction writers, like the dream architects of Flash Gordon, struggle to make a plausible reality from the chaos of their imaginations.

SEE THIS Out of this World: Science Fiction but not as you know it is at the British Library, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB, until 25 Sept 2011, admission free. www.bl.uk.

As the British Library launches Out of This World, an exhibition celebrating science fiction in writing and art, Jon Stone investigates the relationship between poetry and this much-misunderstood literary genre.

Should we, therefore, keep things simple, and say that science fiction poets are simply those poets who consciously make use of the same tropes we see in the movies and computer games – marines, spaceships, teleportation, and so on? Even then, there are poets continuing the work Morgan did. Ian McLachlan, whose debut pamphlet, Confronting the Danger of Art (a collaboration with Norwich artist Phil Brown) is due out this summer, has published a number of science fiction poems across a variety of journals. Whereas Adcock and Pudovkin’s poems occupy several pages each, making them in some ways lyricised short stories, McLachlan’s pieces are generally only one or two stanzas – brief, protective reflections of future outsiders such as a timed care who attends to dolphins from his bicycle, and a mutant who becomes an Olympic athlete. Consider the scheming of this moral mad scientist in his poems ‘Kirk & Co’:

Kirk and his kind are taking over. They’ve snatched me in the thin static pause at the other end of the line, as if they are real and I am the shadow. But I have developed a serum that makes feeling essential. One by one, I will puncture them all with it. In the garden’s hush, I write my Lycan bow, fix feathers to my darts.

If any number of poets are incorporating elements of science fiction into their verse, there’s evidence that some, like McLachlan, are prepared to embrace it even more fully.

Jon Stone co-wrote, with Kirsten Irving, No, Robot, No! (Forest Publications), a pamphlet themed around sci-fi visions of robots. They are also the creators of Fixwell magazine and Sidekick Books.

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For characteristically ludic experiment with language, while in ‘The Loch Ness Monster’s Song’, not a single word is discernible English. The latter raises something of a conundrum: where poetry avoids being speculative aims of poetry science fiction can be simultaneously served through the convention of the lyrical.

Alternative Earths

But consider also the title poem from Andrew Pudovkin’s debut collection, Year of the Lion (Salt, 2010). Told from the perspective of a reminiscing adult, it describes a craze for pet lion cubs that ends in a nationwide cult: Although far from Star Trek fare, its premise carries the implication of generic meddling or future breeding programmes. The events it describes are not even a remote possibility without some element of social (and probably technological) change, and yet the reader accepts them in the same way they accept the premise of Flash Gordon.

Where we identify such similarities, might it be said that the long-term concerns of science fiction are invading poetry on an intimate level, unknown to the host poet who makes use of Raine’s ‘martian’ perspective or of outdated ‘other’ worlds? If so, perhaps poets like Ross Sutherland and Luke Kennard are our contemporary sci-fi poets. They dream up alternative Earths from poem to poem, equalling Philip K. Dick in their output of reality-bending micro-universes, casting a sardonic light on our own. Or might it be that, while sci-fi meets poetry, it is inevitably melted down into another plaything in the poet’s Tardis-like toybox?

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The British section of the underworld is probably a box-edged ‘community’ of seething neighbours, trapped together for eternity” Members’ poems PAGE 4

The rooted self

Robert Saxton looks at poems that use trees as mirrors

The ocean is a sprawling archery of the unconscious — although poems on that subject often turn out to be meditations on light, not deep. With a tree, however, you can have a one-to-one relationship. Imagine a ghost that is more robustly self than the self it haunts. Such trees are reacting to our vulnerabilities as surrogates. In another way they resemble cartoon characters: you can inflict more damage on them than humans usually end up, yet they feel no pain.

Even a language-surfing deconstructivist like John Ashbery has felt their ancient pull. In his ‘Some Trees’ they arrange, like a psychic magnet, the scattered filings of a couple's cluelessness — finding that a stand of joined-up trees (separate trunks pushed up from the same root system) provides a waymark for their disoriented selves, the poet and his companion. Ashbery realises they are daubed “as in we are”. The message is: “We may touch, love, explain.” Uncompromisingly sooner reassure themselves in the poem, but for a time this thoroughly reason-able three-step programme for getting on with life is a beacon as clearly visible through the modernist mist as the trees themselves.

If, by contrast, Philip Larkin’s ‘The Trees’ slips so effortlessly into our mind, that’s in part because it subtly dodges its own meaning. The concluding refrain leaves us thoughtless in a grove, listening to the swelling ‘caroles’ of the tree canopies lyrically assenting their annual resurgence: ‘Last year is dead, they seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.’ Winding back the logic of the poem, however, we find a deeper, more disturbing theme: the thorough, reason-able tree, just as mortal as humans; and if the truth is, trees are all this poem is about.” For Paterson’s ‘Two Trees’, the first poem in Rain, Paterson tells a story that begins in the manner of a South American novelist, or maybe Louis de Bernières: “One morning, Don Miguel got out of bed / With one idea rooted in his head: / To graft his orange to his lemon tree.” The fusion bears fruit eventually, giving a double crop from intertwined boughs. Then a new owner takes an axe to the trees and replants them yards apart.

The plain language of parables has us casting around for significance — especially when the trees’ initial unresponsiveness is attributed to shame or fright. Yet the lack of an obvious human parallel (at a stretch, a forced human parallel (at a stretch, a forced human parallel) encourages us to focus our sympathy on the trees. In ‘The Trees’ Paterson’s insistence, building up to the last couplet, that “They were trees, and trees don’t weep or ache or shout. / And all this poem is about.” Is for example, each tree is conjured straining (or not straining, but the idea of straining has been implanted) “on its shacked root to face? / The other’s empathy, intimate embrace” — what is brilliantly vivid in the way it equates branches and arms, with a faint echo of Muldoon, probably accidental. Rooted in earth yet reaching to the heavens, the tree, like the lotus in Eastern symbology, is an image of our divided nature, but it’s the earthly side that most poets find inspiring. In The Tree House Kathleen Jamie introduces us to a real tree, or at least one that’s realistically presented: an axis and viewpoint of a particular life in a particular place. The details are off-beat and slightly mystifying, for the poet is talking to a friend (or just possibly her partner) about other lives they might have had, and as eavesdroppers on a private conversation we have only pointers to work with. We assume that the person climbing the tree at the beginning is the poet as a child (“Here I was unspeakable”), but in the third stanza she morphs into being a mother, using the tree house as a retreat from family pressures. Perhaps making other life choices would still have brought them to this settlement “hitched tight beside the river”, where she and her friend (or partner) have knocked together of planks and packing chests, a dwelling of sorts; a gall we’ve asked the tree to carry of its own dead, and every spring to drape in leaf and blossom, like a palm. This is an eloquent example of tree surrogacy, the burden of our ‘difficult’/ chthonic anchoroge in the apple-sweetened earth: visited upon the tree house, no doubt to prevent us from feeling sorry for ourselves.

Robert Saxton’s latest book is Hisald’s Calendar (Canongate OxfordDon, 2010).

READ ON

John Ashberry’s ‘Some Trees’ collected in The Mooning of Starting Out (Carcanet); Philip Larkin’s ‘The Trees’ can be found in Collected Poems (Faber and Faber); John Milton’s ‘New Heath’ (Faber); Don Paterson’s Rain (Faber) and Kathleen Jamie’s The Tree House (Picador).
An example is Graves’s own poem ‘The Gnat’, which tells the story of a shepherd who is driven mad when his brain becomes infected by a gnat. He now believes he is driven and decides to sacrifice his dog. Unable to face carrying out his plan, he intends to get a local priest to do the job for him. However, in a terrifying nocturnal experience, he does kill the animal himself. The gnat swells to giant size, bursts out of his skull and flies away.

Our flies the new-born creature from his mouth
And humming feaniously like a huge engine
Racketst about the room, smites the unseen
Glass of half-open windows, reeds, unicorns,
Stares out into the meadows, and is gone.

Miraculously the man lives on, but in transmogrified form. He is no longer a shepherd but an agricultural labourer. The roots of this poem, Graves tells us, lie in two stories – the first a Talmudic legend concerning the Roman commander Titus the Wicked, who devastated the Holy of Holies by fornicating with a prostitute upon a Torah and was punished when a gnat flew up his nose and lodged in his brain. The second concerned a deceased old man who believed there was something alive inside his head that had been placed there as punishment for past wrongdoing. He had asked a local farmer to kill his dog.

Resolving ‘unconscious conflict’

Graves’s interpretation of the subtext reveals a despondent personal story. Three years after the end of the war, he was still suffering with shell-shock and believed he might be cured by seeking treatment with an analyst. However he had heard that such treatment might be ‘too effective’ and leave him unable to write. In waking life he brushed aside this concern, but in the dream-like mood of the poem he believed he was recreating the dreaded outcome: the death of poetic capacity. He interprets the image of the shepherd as a representation of himself as poet, the priest as analyst, the gnat as his shell-shock, with its associations to air-raids and the crazy noise of battle, and the sheep-dog as poetry. The labourer is also himself, forced away from poetry into the work of a schoolmaster or bank-clerk as the price of his cure.

Graves’s insight supports W.H. Rivers’s ideas. The whole poem has to do with fear of psychoanalysis (which Rivers was influenced by and critical of) and the damage it might do by resolving ‘unconscious conflict’. The gnat flying from the protagonist’s mouth would appear to represent verbal anamnesis or cathartic cure. But Graves attributes his recovery to his uncovering of a more obvious cause: his unacknowledged worry that another war was imminent. Only when he realised that psychoanalytic interpretations concerning the infantile unconscious mind (as opposed to ‘Riversian’ ones concerning the everyday adult world) could neither cure his anxiety nor put an end to his poetry was the problem laid to rest.

Ted Hughes’s work undoubtedly falls into Graves’s ‘Romantic’ category. But he had no fear of analysis, at least when carried out by himself. And his conclusions reinforce the idea that unconscious conflict, mental pain, is metabolised through the medium of poetic creation. Not simply by catharsis, but by the linguistic process of symbol formation. It is here that his experience converges with that of modern analysts. In a moving letter to his son Nicholas written in February 1998 (Letters of Ted Hughes, ed. Christopher Reid, Faber), Hughes explains how in Ireland he dealt with ‘the big unimaginable event in my life, that had somehow to be managed – internally – by me... not by writing about it directly, but dealing with the deep emotional tangle of it indirectly, through other symbols.”

That it had not happened before he put down to “the incessant interference of the feminists”, ensuring that he had not been “allowed ever to forget it enough to let it sink into the imagination and be changed there subconsciously.”

Robert Graves was not alone in his part the unconscious plays in the writing of poetry, writes Stephen Wilson.

Robert Graves was not alone in his part the unconscious plays in the writing of poetry, writes Stephen Wilson.
New kids on the block

ON THE RACKS Popshot and Iota magazines can both be called ‘new’ though for different reasons. How do they compare? Colette Sensier spoke to their respective editors Jacob Denno and Nigel McLoughlin.

Iota and Popshot are, in different ways, new kids on the block. Iota, with its slow, academically based growth, is a highly regarded title, and Nigel, who had “great respect” for the magazine before being asked to edit it, takes its continued success seriously. Both Nigel and his opposite number at Popshot, Jacob Denno, have departed from the standard magazine model – though their priorities are certainly different.

Many poetry start-ups happen online – websites easily outnumber printed publications – but Popshot, like Iota, persists as a print version, promising a “clear, just a big buying opportunity.” The websites share an objective: to enrich the print experience, not to replace it. It’s very important,” Jacob says, “to remember we’re a print magazine everything else should be a supplement to it.” Nigel agrees: “to remember we’re a print magazine for new poets, Popshot as a magazine for new readers. Of the two editors, it’s Nigel who declares himself passionate about “giving an arena to new poets”, although Popshot also carries work by “talented contemporary poets who are falling below the radar”. Iota’s policy of anonymity makes it a “place that doesn’t disadvantage new poets”, where newer writers can “test themselves”. Nigel is enthusiastic about welcoming new writers on board. And the policy of publishing more than one poem by each poet, judging each submission as a batch, allows a more expansive showcase than the one-off lyric. Nigel’s own high regard for Iota is based partly on its success in bringing emerging writers to prominence. He cites Yvonne Eller and Laura Elitø, who last year won the first Café Writers Norfolk Graduate Commission.

The gap between the early adopters and the rest of the poetry world might close as the magazine extends beyond trendy east London and into the mainstream. However, Iota’s view is that “poetry somewhat lacks a main hub or community where you can find out all the exciting events and goings on.” Iota is a new forum of readers, and anyone bothered by the huge proportion of people eager to be published, compared to the people buying new poetry, has to be glad about that. It’s great to see Jacob taking wide appeal for granted; he says half-jokingly that Popshot’s future is “being sold in every newsagent in the country, with a circulation which exceeds that of Vogue.” Meanwhile, Nigel’s focus on developing the poetry world’s existing resources, rather than seeking out a new audience, is developing a community via a process of inclusion. There’s plenty of room for both visions, though were the editors to exchange ideas, perhaps something even more innovative might emerge. The two share a dedication to being as inclusive as possible, whether that’s Jacob’s broad distribution and publicity or Nigel’s “great variety of styles... something for every constituency.”

Colette Sensier has been published in magazines including Rapidio and South, and featured in Asking A Shadow to Dance: 35 Young British Poets for Oxfam, and Poetry South-East 2011.

Jacob is full of fresh enthusiasm for new territory. “Since starting Popshot,” he enthuses, “I’ve discovered a much larger poetry world than I ever knew existed.” Popshot’s audience represents “new poetry readers” – culturally aware, bookish, possibly writers themselves. However they may not see poetry as something that they themselves could or would want to be a part of. “I like the idea of publishing poetry that can appeal to virtually anyone whether they have an interest in the art form or not,” Jacob says. Nigel’s view is that poetry magazines are houses for courses, that each magazine’s audience is small enough to constitute a demographic all its own, but I think Jacob would disagree. “Someone once described the poetry we print as ‘pop poetry’, which I really like the idea of,” he says. And although Jacob is just 23, Popshot’s point of difference isn’t restricted to youth (though its recent slogan, “Poetry. Not just for tweed jackets.”) Jacob says, “the idea is to reach a younger, wider and more diverse audience – a selection of those three things rather than a combination. It’s more about the mindset of the people that we’re targeting than their age.”

Iota’s in the early adopters and “not many people seem to be aware of it”, Jacob says. “A lot of things are happening but there’s no tie in with them. There’s a need for something that we’re targeting than their age.”

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A.C. CLARKE DOUBLE TAKE

See here a toddler’s arm, the plump wrist creased, the dimpled fingertips curving as if waiting for the mother to clap all six tight in her own. Hush now, she’d say, it’s all right.

There in the next jar, hardly lit, hangs another, the mirror image down to its supernumerary digit.

Whoever labelled them typed neatly on old-fashioned keys, their medic’s language precise. No sign of a dip.

What I’m looking at spelled out.

Twice over. Still I fail to grasp.

SUSANNAH HART MOVING IN

He was an unwilling tenant in his new lodgings. He didn’t say much, but it cost us a lot of grief to get him comfortably installed. I was worried about the location. The neighbours were all much older than him, though Barbara on the left looked likely to be kindly and William over the way seemed, from what little we could see, dependable and solid. The view was some small consolation: gossipy trees and heaps and heaps of easy cheerful flowers. I didn’t like to leave him among strangers, but, deft-handed, you manoeuvred me away, insisting hopelessly that he would seem much more at home once the headache was up.

JULIA WEBB NEIGHBOURS

My shirred sausage fingers grasp for forks in greasy water, eyes to the front, no choice but to look as I wash up breakfast, lunch.

Half-baked bodies dart across the rectangular view of next door’s kitchen; pink Hair and Music-Pump Testosterone vie for a place at the gas cooker hood.

A curl of smoke lips the slatted frame, bottles clunk and rattle into the recycling bin. I picture life behind the slats: the steamed up bathroom, a broken broom.

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