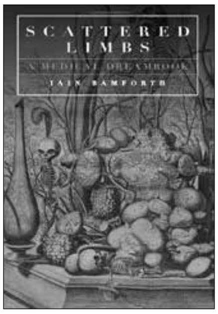
Reviews

Piece by Piece



Scattered Limbs, **Iain Bamforth**
(Galileo Publishers) £16.99
Reviewed by Kirsty Gunn

There are so many things going on in an essay. There's the pleasure of impress, for a start, upon the mind. That sense upon reading of gaining immediately relation to the text; nothing here is to be won or strained after or even missed.

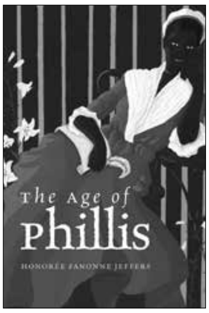
Then there's the personal aspect of the thing. Of being in the company of someone who has made thinking and writing part of their life's work and who wants to engage the reader in that process. We shall go through this together, the essay says. I have no idea much where I am headed, but how agreeable it is that you are here with me for the journey. So is the essay movement, talk. It is not the result of prior thoughts and summaries, someone catching you in their grip and jawing on. It has never, heaven forbid, a drum to beat, or a march to call. Nor is it 'about' an idea; instead it becomes one. The essay really is intimate – 'The voice in your ear of someone you rather like', as one of America's foremost essayists and a great champion for the form, Phillip Lopate, put it, at a conference about essays held in Arbroath a year or so ago.

How civilised the form, then. Not hustling to be entertainment or wanting to grab the limelight with one big idea. Essays want to muse and digress, and Iain Bamforth muses and digresses most gloriously in *Scattered Limbs*, a collection of parts that come together in one body of breathing, living thinking. Here are essays readers of this magazine will recognise from the author's 'Catchwords' column – for their fragmentary style, their wry diffidence, a casual laying down of one idea here, often no more than a paragraph, and another there, perhaps a bit longer, to take its place below. Iain Bamforth is a poet as well as a medical doctor, a reader of myth as well as anatomies – and this sensibility, of one who easily arranges a piece about science along with one on imagination, means the accumulation of his thought arrives with us much as a set of poems might, with gaps of white space between to account for the exquisite depth charges which have gone off in each as happily as fireworks. Yet how they have changed the landscape even so. Here he is, in 'Emotion Studies', leaping from 'Emotions are elaborate kinds of disclosures and beckonings' that can never be fixed, 'ethical ways of apprehending the world, and yet we are largely clueless about them' to, in 'More Body Parts' on the facing page, 'Why do we utter "My Foot!" as a dismissive ejaculation?' After all, he writes, the French say '*mon oeil!*', and '*Tu prends ton pied?*' means to ask whether ejaculation, in another sense, has indeed occurred. In a couple of paragraphs we've been jolted from one kind of feeling to another, setting the concept of a self and its odd language into a merry spin.

The slight appearance of these essays is gorgeous. Voice in the ear indeed! Allowing a whisper of a thought, a shy, sly presentation of a fact to lead on to some other connection that then quite easily changes the way we think about a thing, or deepens it... That is Iain Bamforth's great technique. *Techne,* he reminds us modestly in 'Crafts', was not something the gods were ever going to come down on hard. If we showed ourselves as tip-top at, say, lyre playing or pottery, there would be no call for hubris, only the reward which comes from doing a thing and doing it pretty fabulously. 'It was only after... the First World War, when the machine seemed to have won, that the word "craft" became derisory – a past time for eccentrics and the slightly loopy.'

Well, *Scattered Limbs* may not augur wrath from Olympus, only my feeling is that there's more than expertise on show here, in this glorious collection. The subtitle of *Scattered Limbs* is *A Medical Dreambook* and while it is indeed an 'incubator' of phantoms, as Iain Bamforth describes his project, surreal and groping thoughts coming at us from all directions out of the dark, this is surely logopoeia we are witnessing. One finishes reading not as though from breaking sleep, but out of full and vivid consciousness. What's more, we awake with a smile on our faces and a feeling of, yes, great joy.

The Age of Phillis



The Age of Phillis, **Honorée Fanonne Jeffers (Wesleyan UP) £19.95**
Reviewed by Andrew Hadfield

There are few more important enigmas in the history of English poetry than Phillis Wheatley. The first African-American author of a book of poetry, Phillis Wheatley (1753–84) was the name given to her by the slave-owning couple who bought her, John and Susannah Wheatley. The real name of the poet, who was probably born in Gambia or Senegal, is not known. She arrived in Boston in 1761 when she was about eight, on the slave ship, *Phillis*, which the Wheatleys used to provide her slave name. Accordingly, convention now is to refer to her as Phillis Wheatley Peters, her married name, as that was one of the few choices she was able to make in her life in colonial America (and a married name has at least as much dignity as that of a ship).

Wheatley Peters was a precocious talent: under the Wheatleys' tutelage she learned Latin and Greek and started to write poetry as a teenager. She travelled to London in 1773 and her volume, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was published later that year. The Wheatleys emancipated her and she married John Peters, a free black grocer. According to some testimony (not necessarily reliable) the couple had three children, all of whom died young, and descended into poverty, either the result of John's improvidence (like Ann Hathaway, John Peters is frequently blamed without reliable evidence, for the unhappiness of his brilliant spouse) or, more plausibly, the economic effects of the Revolutionary War through which the couple lived. Phillis, never a healthy young woman, died at the age of thirty-one, probably about as many years as she could expect, perhaps while her husband was in prison.

Wheatley Peters spent the first quarter of her life in West Africa so must have been able to remember significant details of her childhood. However, her poems retain no traces of her early years and she is known for the loyalty and gratitude she expresses for her good fortune and the advantages offered by colonial society, most famously in her dense short lyric, 'On Being Brought From Africa to America':

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
'Their colour is a diabolic die.'
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

It's a neat and forceful poem, centred around an obvious poetic conceit, the contrast between the two extremes of light and dark, and there is a stern reminder for backsliding, racist white Christians, that black people can be just as virtuous believers as they are. It is not a message that modern readers are likely to find palatable, and the question is whether Wheatley Peters did herself. Was she so enmeshed in American society that she could dismiss the land of her parents and ancestors as pagan, rejoicing at her enforced deracination, and seeing the colour of her own skin as something to be overcome, refined and effectively washed white? The activist and poet, Amiri Baraka (1934–2014), saw her as a 'race traitor', but she was defended by the powerful voice of Henry Louis Gates Jr, who pointed out the irony that Thomas Jefferson was able to dismiss Wheatley Peters's literature, but was lauded as a liberator of slaves while the enslaved black female poet was regarded as something of an 'Uncle Tom' figure.

The distinguished poet, Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, is clear that Wheatley Peters was a cunning and subversive writer, clever enough to play the games that the authorities demanded but always able to code her messages carefully, speak between the lines, and assert her own identity through her tricksy verbal brilliance. The volume under review here is a mixture of a series of original poems, some written in response to Wheatley Peters's own works; some based on subjects related to her life and experiences and those of other Africans who were forced to cross to America by the Middle Passage; and some written in response to later works from the tradition of black American writing that Wheatley Peters did so much to establish; and a scholarly memoir appended to the poems that outlines the genesis of the collection and the problems facing those wishing to uncover the truth of Wheatley Peters's life. There is also a helpful series of notes for the poems.

Jeffers is certain that Wheatley Peters's consciousness was formed in Africa and that she carried the remnants of her identity – probably Muslim and from the Wolof people – to New England. What connects these poems in the first book, 'Before', is the impossibility of recalling what needs to be remembered and the consequent expunging of identity, as the contemporary poet reflects on her history and her relationship to her mother, a pointed contrast to that of Wheatley Peters:

A pearl she lives by the sea.
The strand of a gathered
Plait. Needed point: surely, love
doesn't rest in emptied air
Without some disappointment,

but this is a good moment. Isn't
it? – I can run to my own

playground, remember a cupped
palm next to my ear. I can tell
my mother who is yet alive.

I can claim my memories. She
can answer her ringing
telephone. I won't forget her name
or mine. ('Before the Taking of
Goonay' (child)).

Jeffers herself is conscious that the lives of her ancestors were dislocated and they were forcibly displaced, but they have a tradition that has its roots in another continent, whereas Wheatley Peters had none (the memoir acknowledges that, although her parents taught her to revere Wheatley Peters, they had little time for her poetry). The next poem, 'Fracture', with its insistent, repetitive beat expressing the foreboding of the imminent Atlantic crossing, also charts the erasure of names, here through the breaking up of families and local groups:

The men arrive. The door opens.
The men arrive. The water
welcomes.
The men arrive. The mourning
longs.
The men arrive. Our names shall
scatter.

The moving poem 'Enreaty: Yaay' juxtaposes the bald description of John Wheatley praising her accomplishments and ability to learn at such rapid speed with the anguish of her mother pleading for her return ('still my child / mine / and don't forget me / or this piece of land / oh come back'). In the book, 'After', Susannah Wheatley assumes the role of parent, but things are never going to be quite the same, 'The fickle air between them almost love' ('Mothering 2'). Almost, but not quite. Jeffers wonders whether it was John or Susannah who bought the little slave girl and that she would surely have grasped the nature of the dramatic change in her circumstances, her earlier understanding carried over to the New World: 'Too wise when she tasted / the last of verdancy – / understanding that she was naked, / that heroes strip leaves from the trees / they own?' ('Fathering 2').

The poems work best, I think, when they express an awareness of fissures, gaps that cannot be closed, whatever the desires and assumptions of the protagonists. Caring for her adopted slave when she suffers from asthma, Susannah might have promised 'the waft / of that grieving mother's spirit / that she would keep this daughter safe / yet *enslaved*' ('Susannah Wheatley Tends to Phillis in her Asthmatic Suffering'). Among the most imaginatively successful poems are the lost letters, which quote the words of real or imagined 'originals' interspersed with a disguised voice – or cancelled thoughts – articulating the suppressed truth. A number of these poems involve Samson Occom (1723–92), the native American pastor who was a friend of the Wheatley family. When his mentor, Eleazor Wheelock, redirects funds that Occom helped raise for Moor's Indian Charity School to found instead an elite institution for white boys, the Ivy League Dartmouth College, Occom writes to Susannah Wheatley ostensibly expressing his thanks and affirming his pious faith. However, the text in italics reveals his true feelings:

(my people scold me for believing
wheelock's lies
that white man who promised to
start a school

for the children of my kind he
promised
rooms bordered by brick and wood
that he would teach them tricks of
english

that man's a colorless devil like the
one
who spoke scripture in the
wilderness)
('Lost Letter 4: Samson Occum,
Mohegan, To Susannah
Wheatley, Boston).

The subtext is surely Wheatley's own poem cited above expressing her apparent good fortune in being transported to America and escape from her black, pagan heritage. Native Americans and African slaves alike had learned to imitate the language of the colonial oppressor.

As Jeffers's thoughtful essay on the inspiration for the volume reveals, she is very keen to rehabilitate John Peters from the racist perception of him as a fickle and irresponsible black man incapable of organising his affairs and running a successful business, as well as looking after his wife and family properly. It is an impassioned and reasoned case that leads to the book, 'Love', in which the two free black Americans fall for each other. Wheatley Peters has dreams of the handsome John seeing him as a 'cane-sweet / man who could not break apart, / that John had pretty white teeth' ('Free Negro Courtship 1'). The irony is writ large and small here. It was, of course, sugar cane that brought them to America and made their courtship possible, as cheap labour was needed to grow and harvest the sugar crop and its success would not have been possible without the Atlantic slave trade. John's teeth are attractive but they may be rotted like the sugar they resemble, just as John and Phillis are brought together and destroyed by global forces too powerful for them to understand or resist. 'Lost Letter 19' has Wheatley Peters speaking almost entirely between the lines, the written words, 'I pray you are safe and thriving in Boston, / and I remain your fellow servant in Christ', preceded by her fears for her beloved in the Revolutionary War:

i had no one else please do not scold
me
if you are waiting for me all will be
well
my love my love my love my love my
love

Later, in the book 'Liberty', there is a mildly bawdy wedding hymn, acknowledging that now they are free and together they do not have to be restrained by the rules of politeness, respect and gratitude that have determined the nature of their lives. The couple 'walk home / from church, naughty / and able'. They will 'descend to the bed – / *again* – / for the fiftieth or hundredth time.' In the final line Jeffers, aware that she is writing against the grain in defending John Peters, asks the reader to 'Give them this'.

'Revolution' is also among the more striking of the gatherings of poems. It opens with a link between the time of the Declaration of Independence and the advent of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, angry at white appropriation of black suffering then and now:

Redcoats with sneers, in tracts call
themselves *slaves.*
Insist they're tethered, yet the
Africans –

the many souls, the wretched, the
taken
who move from *human* to
trafficked –

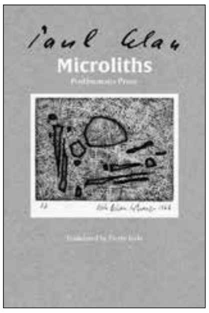
are ignored as white men don
paper chains,
the language of wounded
throats, chatteled claims.

There is a nice, sly poem addressed to General George Washington – with whom Wheatley Peters did correspond – that cites the original verse letter to the great man (and slave owner) with words in italics crossed out as the real thoughts of the once enslaved poet are carefully hidden. She states that she has taken the freedom to address Washington, '*who I have heard behaves like / either a gentleman or a tyrant / depending on his moods or his money*', the privilege of the entitled. Washington, who appropriates his slave's teeth in his famous wooden dentures, is given a moment of revelation: 'Her quill and life defy my age's Reason. / She steps in God's house, a different season' ('General George Washington Rereads a Poem and Letter he Received from Phillis Wheatley and Agonizes over his Response'). The powerful heroic couplet reads like one of Wheatley Peters's own poems, a sign that her bold logic was getting through to those who mattered, as well as suggesting that a literary dialogue was possible if only (white) people would listen.

The collection ends on a sad note, John Peters addresses his wife from prison just before her death (in the essay/memoir, 'Looking for Miss Phillis', Jeffers explains why she thinks John was in prison when his wife died). Christmas is coming and 'snow will drift through these bars', so he asks her to send him a poem to cheer him up, but there were none left.

The Age of Phillis is a distinguished, interesting and challenging work, based on extensive research and thinking. There are places in which the justified anger of the writer shines through perhaps a little too much. But this is a fitting tribute to a major literary pioneer who should be on every reading list, as well as the work of a mature and confident poet who knows why her work matters too and who can produce lines as pellucid and moving as Phillis Wheatley Peters herself.

'Something is against us'



Microliths They Are, Little Stones: Posthumous Prose, **Paul Celan, translated by Pierre Joris (Contra Mundum) £20**
Reviewed by Anthony Barnett

Pierre Joris's translation of Paul Celan's posthumous prose compliments Rosmarie Waldrop's translation of Celan's *Collected Prose* (Carcanet). 'Conversation in the Mountains' therein first appeared in the letterpress pamphlet *The Literary Supplement: Writings*, alongside 'Answer to a Letter' by Edmond Jabès, and a reprint of J. H. Prynne's Celan memorial poem 'Es lebe der König'.

Microliths represents the culmination of Joris's fifty years work on Celan, including two volumes of *Collected Poems* (FSG) and an extraordinary feat in translating drafts and materials for the speech *The Meridian* (Stanford UP). *Microliths* reminds me of George Oppen's *Daybooks* (not a name given them by Oppen), posthumously published piecemeal. Not that Celan's, much shorter in extent, posthumous prose is piecemeal. It is, however, pieces. One may wonder how much of it Celan, as with Oppen, would have been pleased to see in print. That said, there are wonderful aphorisms, narrative prose, notes for dramatic pieces, and mixed blessings among theoretical prose.

The section, 'Texts on the Goll Affair', is devoted to the abuse Celan suffered at the hands of Claire Goll, widow of Ivan Goll, with manufactured charges of plagiarism. Celan helped the Golls in Ivan's dying days, in personal and literary ways. He could not shake off the betrayal. The case is made for this being the catalyst leading to Celan's last mental deterioration and suicide. Celan grapples with his Jewishness: 'something is against us'.

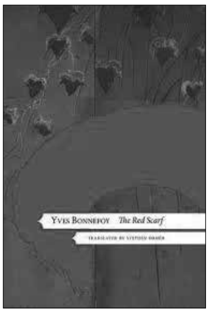
Celan was not always fortunate in the company he kept. That seems to have been more critical for him than the wonderful friends he did have, Nelly Sachs, Ingeborg Bachmann, for example. Fellow Romanian E. M. Cioran crops up. We may never understand why Celan was friendly with a man who upheld the regime that killed his parents, however much Cioran may have sought to repudiate his former self. Then there is Édouard Roditi, who Joris tells us told him Celan was a minor poet. It takes one to know one, or not, for Roditi is the only minor character here. As I wrote elsewhere, in reviewing Franco-Romanian poet Benjamin Fondane, much of what Cioran said in a 1985 conversation leaves a bad taste in the mouth: he rightfully discredits Roditi's wholly deplorable utterances about Celan – in 'Paul Celan and the Cult of Personality' (*World Literature Today*, vol. 66, no. 1, winter 1992) – but he is prone to deplorables himself: 'We were friends. He [Celan] translated one of my books. But we ceased to be friends when he moved to the 16th. That is for me another world—the haute bourgeoisie, and so on, live there: Celan too, since his wife was a marquise. It was finished. In Paris, friendships are a question of neighbourhood'. As far as I know, from my having known Gisèle Celan-Lestrange and Edmond Jabès, that was no bar to the friendship between Celan and Jabès.

It is a task of mine to call publishers to task. The setting of *Microliths* is mostly very readable. But, it is set in Warnock, from Adobe's chief type designer Robert Slimbach. It is he who has foisted on the world the now ubiquitous ghastly crabbed Th ligature (*PNR*'s type is free of it). Contra Mundum also uses overly ornate, as is the italic, ct, sp, st, etc ligatures. They are a distraction. Worse: their books are print-on-demand. I would say nothing about that regrettable way of the world but for the fact that there are two presumptuous, boastful pages of publisher demands for support. They are vulgar. They have no place in *Microliths*.

Pierre Joris is a fine translator. He weighs every word as far as he finds possible according to the original. He delves deeply. His translations of the poems build on pioneering work by Michael Hamburger and John Felstiner in particular. It is hard to see who might follow Joris, though doubtless there will be efforts.

Celan in 'The Conference Project' in *Microliths*: 'I do not speak of the "modern" poem. I speak of the poem today. And to the essential aspects of this today—my today, for I do speak on my own behalf—belongs its lack of a future: I cannot keep from you that I do not know how to answer the question toward which morrow the poem is moving; if the poem borders on such a morrow, then it possesses darkness. The poem's hour of birth, ladies and gentlemen, lies in darkness. Some claim to know that it is the darkness just before dawn; I do not share this assumption.'

Adieu



The Red Scarf: Followed by Two Stages and Additional Notes, Yves Bonnefoy, translated by Stephen Romer (Seagull Press) £18.99 hb
Reviewed by Chris Miller

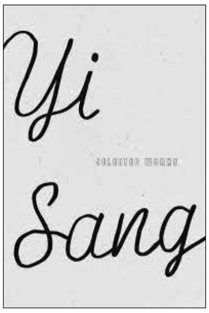
Bonnefoy's last piece of extended prose is a sort of memoir, an exploration of his parents' origins and relationship. But that suggests a book much simpler than this one. For Bonnefoy writes here as the frustrated author of a poetic narrative that would neither resolve itself nor leave him alone. The structure of the book is seemingly determined by Bonnefoy's psychoanalysis of that story; the 'events' of the eponymous poem open out to reveal a suppressed autobiography. We are thus firmly conducted through his own childhood by the interpretative psychopomp. Barthes, in the non-memoir of his mother, *La Chambre Claire,* bitterly interrogates the hermeneutics of suspicion for a space of innocence in which he can declare his filial love.

By contrast, Freud is here the conventional but pliable authority that Bonnefoy brings to bear on his recalcitrant creation. His decision to approach a memoir through his aporetic poem might itself be a defence mechanism, allowing him to see the life of his parents only through the prestige of authorship and the symbols of poetry. Yet our sense of the poet following *l'écharpe rouge* through the labyrinth is convincing and often moving, as each repressive bulkhead dissolves into a further chamber.

'The Red Scarf' of the title is at once the fertility offered by the young wife to the suitor and the consanguinity of the nuclear family. Central to this story is Bonnefoy's guilt; he could not release his father from a silence born of Élie's sense of inadequacy to the intellectual slant of his wife's family, a sense exacerbated by his son's choice of the literary word. Here we might almost be in the English post-Second World War memoir of class betrayal through education. But in 'The Red Scarf', as in the pieces that preceded it and accompany it here, 'Two Scenes' and 'Additional Notes', we are more often in the world of *présence* and Surrealist intuition than of sociology; the central poetic narrative and the 'Two Scenes' are both close to 'automatic' writing. (Bonnefoy's notion of character formed by landscape seems to belong rather to Taine than to Freud.)

The book thus becomes, after that masterpiece *L'Arrière-Pays,* which Romer has also translated, a second volume of poetical autobiography and shares material with the informal sonnets in *Raturer Outre.* Bonnefoy was writing in his nineties, and comparison with *L'Arrière-Pays* can be damaging; he has so often been able, through sentences periodic and circumstantial, to surprise the reader with wonderful conclusions, and, though he still does so, the cost is now higher; his war on the concept as the enemy of the epiphanic and the real alike has moments of dogged insistence, his more elevated rhetoric sometimes drifts free of the argument, and his prose can be clotted. Through this polychrome skein, Romer's translation charts a well-judged course, sometimes enhancing the clarity of his text, at all times imparting rhythmical authority to the English. Bonnefoy chose his translator well. Compliments to Seagull Books on this beautiful edition.

Where eyes are supposed to be



Selected Works, Yi Sang, edited by Don Mee Choi, translated by Jack Jung, Sawako Nakayasu, Don Mee Choi, and Joyelle McSweeney (Wave Books) $25
Reviewed by Greg Thomas

The timeline at the start of this selected edition of Yi Sang's (1910–37) work recounts the twin events that set in course his emotional and intellectual development. On 29 August 1910, a month before his birth in Seoul, the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty was signed, making Korea a formal protectorate of the Japanese Empire. Around four years later, the group of artists and poets who would become known as the Dada movement began to congregate in Zürich.

The works collected in this volume – poems in Korean and Japanese, along with essays and stories – react to the condition of colonial subjugation in a voice of variously displaced rage and trauma, filtered through the anti-rational programmes of Dada and Surrealism. Yi Sang's tone is by turns satirical, morbid, anguished, and brilliantly lurid.

His poems in Japanese – a language brutally enforced upon the annexed Korean state – date mainly from 1931 and seem to take as their animus a desire to dismantle the master's tools and the logical systems encoded therein. Formally elliptical, thematically absurd, one obvious point of reference is Surrealist automatic writing, as in the *slap-in-the-face* gobbets of nonsense which make up 'Beard':

> (BEARD • BEARD • ALL THOSE
> THINGS • THAT QUALIFY AS
> FACIAL hair)
> 1
> THERE IS AND WAS A LAUGHTER
> THAT WAS A FOREST IN THE
> PLACE WHERE EYES ARE
> SUPPOSED TO BE
>
> 2
> CARROT

Sawako Nakayasu's ingenious encoded translations utilise lower-case, capitalised, and small-caps fonts to show how Yi Sang inverted customs around the use of different Japanese scripts for foreign and native words, an underlying formal conceit that was also an act of protest.

At other times, the rhythm of the writing takes on a shifting, serial quality akin to Gertrude Stein or the Japanese modernist Kitasono Katué, whose 1959 minimalist opus 'Monotonous Space' – 'white square/ within it/ white square/ within it ...' is pre-empted by the opening lines of 'Au Magasin de Nouveautes': 'The square in the square in the square in the square in the square...' Here and elsewhere, Yi Sang's writing seems proleptically 'concrete' in the 1950s–60s sense, particularly where the tone of pseudo-scientific or rational enquiry is complemented by the use of abstract visual symbols.

In other places, the construction of byzantine logical systems that collapse in on themselves or become stretched to the point of incoherence, is reminiscent of Beckett's *Watt*:

> I climb up above the first floor to
> the second floor to the third floor
> to the rooftop garden and look
> to the south and there is nothing
> there and look to the north and
> there is nothing there and so I go
> down from the rooftop garden to
> the third floor to the second floor
> to the first floor and the sun that
> rose in the east has set in the west
> rose from the east and set in the
> west and rose from the east and set
> in the west ('Movement')

The poems that Yi Sang began publishing in Korean from 1933 – again, the choice of language was itself an act of resistance – perhaps express a closer connection between language and emotional or bodily impulse. Certainly, in Jack Jung's translations they are marked by a blooming of the subconscious, brilliant fragments of prose poetry enacting the performative causality of dreams:

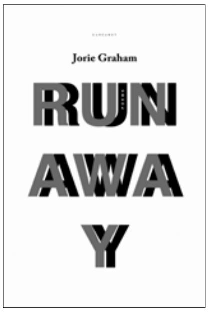
> This ground was once the bottom
> of a primal lake. Salty. The pillars
> holding back
> the curtains become damp. Clouds
> do not come near me. My tonsils
> swell in the
> humorless air. There is a currency
> scandal—my hand, looking like
> a foot, shame–
> lessly holds the crone's throbbing
> hand.
>
> A rumor goes around about a
> tyrant's infiltration. Babies
> constantly turn into lit–
> tle grave mounds. The grown-
> ups' shoes hit other grown-ups'
> shoes. I never want
> to see them again, but where
> can I escape to? In a state of
> emergency, quaran–
> tined neighbors mingle. The
> distant cannon blasts and the
> blisters on our skins
> soothe us ('Street Outside Street')

Recurrent motifs – bodies, limbs (severed and prosthetic), mirrors, blood, ink, families and trees – come to comprise a sort of Surrealist mythopoesis, a fractured optic on contemporary political events (Jung's timeline informs us that 'Street Outside Street' is amongst a number of works making reference to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria). Also pressed into this symbology are anxieties around inheritance, patriarchy, sickness, and unrequited or scorned love.

The stories and essays, notwithstanding their own merits, add colour to the biographical details which frame Yi Sang's poetry. 'After Sickbed', a third-person biographical narrative, evokes the half-dreaming state in which he spent much time while receiving treatment for the tuberculosis that would kill him at the age of twenty-seven: 'His fever rose higher and higher into the night, and he lost consciousness, traveling between dream and reality'. "Spider&Spider-MeetPigs" is a story of Kafkaesque abjection involving two anthropomorphic spiders, a fairy tale of imperial bondage.

Don Mee Choi's team of translators – those named above and Joyelle MacSweeney, whose moving poetic afterword deserves mention – has done a brilliant job in making a highly significant corpus of modernist poetry and prose available to an English-speaking audience.

The Visible We Love



Runaway, Jorie Graham (Carcanet)
Reviewed by Maitreyabandhu

In *The Master and His Emissary* – for my money the most important book on imagination and culture since George Steiner's *Real Presences* – Iain McGilchrist writes that one of the dangers of modernity is the 'willingness to accept an explicit manifesto or message ... as a substitute for imaginative experience'. Jorie Graham's *Runaway* could be read as an essay on this danger. The power of the book, and of her best work in general, comes from the conflict created between the instinct to make statements and the contrary pull of the imagination.

Graham's poetry is characterised by intensity, by an urgency of feeling and expression shading at times into desperation. Her best poems gather pressure as they go, like something being squeezed into the top of an airtight box. An important element of this pressure is her relationship with the great poetry of the past. Her yearning for lyric beauty founded on the natural world – derived from the Romantics, especially Keats – is in tension with her conviction that futurity makes such yearning obsolete.

Poetry is usually past-haunted, Graham's poetry is future-haunted. *Runaway* portrays our present as a dehumanised future of global warming, wild fires, species collapse, mass migration, information glut, surveillance technology, and AI. It is a wired-in, post-human world: 'here's where free choice vanished, here rights, here the / real meaning of the word'('Exchange'). The unique individual with her lyric voice has been deleted: 'My soul has its alarm tuned off' ('Overheard in the Herd'); 'My self, my one *one-self* isn't working for me' ('From the Transience'). Again and again, Graham privileges explicit message over 'imaginative experience', as if the urgency of our situation demands it.:

> Must I put down
> here that this is long ago. That the
> sky has been invisible for years
> now. That the ash
> of our fires has covered the sun.
> That the fruit is stunted yellow
> mold when it appears
> at all and we have no produce to
> speak of. ('Tree')

On one hand the poems of *Runaway* are anti-lyrics. The daunting, almost suffocating, form of many of the poems – long, four-line blocks that run down the page like bars or planks – close off access to lyric flexibility. The language, under pressure, is forced into abstraction, sentences are truncated – if a poet's work could be illustrated by their characteristic punctuation, Auden's would be represented by the semicolon, Graham's by the full stop – or made to run together without punctuation, or mangled into textspeak: 'sd', 'yr', 'u'.

And yet, pulling in the opposite direction, is her lyric sensibility. Against the nightmare endgame of 'Tree', we hear echoes of Keats's Odes, especially 'To Autumn'. Graham's use of 'eglantine' harks back to 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Its 'beechen green, and shadows numberless' work against the wild fires:

> the twisting
> branches and multifaceted
> changing shades,
> and greens, and shades of greens,
> lobed, and lashing sun, the fig
> that seemed to me the
> perfect one, the ready one, it is
> permitted ('Tree')

Keats's bird, emblem of the lyric imagination, sings, perhaps for the last time, in poem after poem of *Runaway*: 'the wren has alighted right here camouflaged in normalcy' ('When Overfull of Pain I'). 'The blackbird in the thicket understands me I think' ('It Cannot Be'). 'A starling's wing /cld be my shadow on/ the monitor' ('The Nest®'). 'A crow lands on the tree. He tries to land. He/ settles, claws, but the grip slips, he rises then comes at it again' ('Sam's Standing').

The lyric impulse to speak to and for the natural world – the poet's soul talking directly to the soul of any or every reader – keeps tugging against the robotic sterility, without depth or memory, that wants to dominate this collection: 'I was human. I would have liked to speak of / that. But not now' ('[To] the Last [Be] Human'). In the same way, lyric elegy – 'There was the wasted splendour of day every day'– works against a Beckettian 'Nothing in all the directions' ('Becoming Other').

The best poems of *Runaway* are deadlocked between the need to make explicit and speak out, and the yearning to celebrate the implicit values of imagination: to touch and sing, to say 'fig' and 'robin'. A child starts to walk or to repeat a word. Birds cry at dawn. All the 'visible we love' wants to be cherished and elegised. 'I look at this foreign country, which was so ready, / which fell ill so suddenly'('When Overfull of Pain I').

Then there's the wind blowing through almost every poem. It might be Shelley's West Wind that might 'Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!' or the harbinger of a new barrenness. Occasionally, it is nature, in lyric dress, sighing for a lost world: 'here is an old wind, watch it orchestrate event' ('Overheard in the Herd'). 'After the high winds stop you're forced to hear / the freshness of what's / there' ('Scarcely There').

Graham's poetry is an urgent reminder of the crisis we face. It is also a plea – late and failing – for imaginative identification and for poetry's capacity (never entirely disavowed) to unite the self's depths with the beauty of the world.

Salt, flame

KERRY HARDIE WHERE NOW BEGINS

Where Now Begins, **Kerry Hardie**
(Bloodaxe Books) £9.95
Reviewed by Sue Leigh

Kerry Hardie writes with clarity and directness of a world seen freshly. She can conjure a scene in a few words: a garden, a room, the landscape beyond her window. I admire the subtle way she moves towards insight. Her poems are deeply personal yet have a mythic quality.

Hardie lives in County Kilkenny with her husband, the writer Sean Hardie. (It is relevant to mention this as one has a sense of two lives lived alongside each other. 'This is the room we inhabit, / fragile as glass, / the light passing through' she writes in 'Real Estate'.) She describes this collection, her eighth, as a 'fairly dark book'. Written before the events of 2020, it reflects on time passing, conflict ('Civil War Aftermath' stands out), memory, relationships, ageing and the death of friends and family. But all this is weighed against an intense love for the physical world.

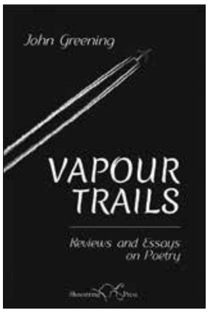
In 'Time Passing', my favourite poem in the book, Hardie longs to experience again a 'fierce lust for the world / but that's memory now'. Her love for the world has not diminished, and she looks for words that 'lie about in the piles of old rags / on the cluttered floor of my mind, / yet still the sweetness is here'. An elegy for her sister considers the bittersweet nature of life and love, 'salt, flame, / sweet honeycomb. / That is why we suffer so.' There are other elegies – for the poet Ciaran Carson, for friends; the loss of her father and the more recent death of her mother haunt many of the poems but she acknowledges that there is a time to move on, 'to lift down the coat / that has hung on the back of your door through the year. / The smell of the wearer has finally faded, / you can't pretend any more'. And in the end she starkly admits, 'You will also be dead … the spirit moving to light, / the flesh settling into the clay'.

Poems about other relationships include 'Talking to My Stepson' in which there is regret: 'the past is a bath filled with water, long cooled' and 'what's done stays done forever'. In 'Bolt the Shutter' (with echoes of Yeats's 'Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad') the poet considers her ancestors: 'Where shall we go, they are saying, / when the hearth of your flesh grows cold? / Bare hills look out in answer, / and the clean empty skies of the morning'.

'Day Lilies' (a plant in which each flower lives for a day, making room for the next one lower down the stem) might be a metaphor for the way we have to live. 'So much I've been given and planted / in the wrong soil or at the wrong time', she writes, but she celebrates these gifts, relishing how they make the garden 'disordered, unruly and joyous'. In another poem about gardening, 'Hymn', she realises the futility of trying to control the garden after summer rain, the wisdom of letting things be, 'all that wild sappy life growing stronger and fiercer'.

The cycle of the seasons turns through the book. The poet is aware of that cycle beginning to close in for her too. In 'Crow-light' she watches the birds at the end of the year, when 'the sky was old and smoky with dusk'. She sees the birds in spring, summer and then again in 'Winter strong, and the land not caring, / and the slouch of fox, / and the white corpse staring.' To face that is to embrace life itself.

Up the Line to England



Vapour Trails: Reviews and Essays on Poetry, **John Greening (Shoestring) £12.50**
Reviewed by Martin Caseley

'I believe there is still such a thing as English poetry', regular *PN Review* contributor Greening states in his preface: the first half of this book accordingly explores 'Varieties of Englishness', as the subheading puts it. Beginning with the First World War poets Edward Thomas and Edmund Blunden, Greening surveys evidence for the survival of what might be lazily tagged 'traditional' English poetry. The ambiguities in Thomas's life and writing once again surface, whilst a brief examination of Blunden's work concludes 'he is not a complacent pastoralist; he is terrifying'. The former's apparent rural simplicity has long been challenged; the latter's work awaits similar recuperation. Greening finds, however, continuities in unusual places: Kathleen Raine, Norman Nicholson, Patricia Beer.

With the poetry of Raine, Greening considers whether her oracular mysticism is naive or 'compelling', concluding that avoidance of metaphor and the use of symbols allows writing that is somehow 'authentic' and archetypal. This deliberate narrowing of scope allows her to avoid abstraction, but one wonders if summarising her work as 'drawing-room civility' really has much purchase today. The case of Norman Nicholson is more straightforward, if puzzling. Like Charles Causley, another poet Greening is sympathetic to, he has been docketed as a regional writer, yet the fall of this former Faber author into obscurity has been swift. Greening concludes that his late work may prove more compelling than his rather formally old-fashioned celebrations of Millom and district. Regarding Patricia Beer, instead of focusing on locality, Greening isolates her 'understated' swerving style of tackling family, religion and death, making intriguing comparisons with Sharon Olds and Stevie Smith.

Several of these discussions isolate the traditions of an 'English line' – the lure of regionalism, old-fashioned tastes, religion, family trauma – but Greening balances the positives with care, reminding us that Patricia Beer as a reviewer possessed 'knife-skills' and that 'innocence' marked the early poems of Nicholson, just as it did Heaney's more celebrated work. He also explores curious byways (his nuanced discussion of Peter Redgrove's career is a case in point), but can seem a little indecisive when faced with a poet of the stature of Thom Gunn. Summarised in Clive Wilmer's words as 'not quite English', the discussion of his late work seems confused: it is surely highly debatable that he 'would prove to be a much better elegist than celebrant of the gay community', and there is much more to be said about *The Man with Night Sweats*, not least that beneath Gunn's 'cool, attentive' tone, deep wells of emotion prevail.

The final essay in this section of the book alights upon Simon Armitage, who would seem a poet designed to illustrate or refute notions of Englishness, but the discussion feels truncated and cursory. It is notable that, while finding room to discuss Carol Rumens, Helen Dunmore and Moniza Alvi, there is nothing on Carol Ann Duffy.

The accompanying essays on Irish and American poets provide a necessary counterpoint to all the Englishness, including thoughtful investigations of other miscellaneous names. A good case is made for the longer visionary work of Andrew Young, whilst the celebratory, but by no means uncritical, discussion of Eavan Boland left me wanting more. Additionally, the pieces on Berryman and Lowell are well-judged reassessments: Greening is surely right that Lowell's *Notebook*-period exhibits 'bleak, dead-end determination', rather than the exciting breakthroughs in *Life Studies*. Ideas of the persistence of Englishness have dissipated a little by the end of this book, but Greening's clear and judicious approach has much to recommend it.

Showing What's Noticed: Three Chapbooks

The Years, **Jamie McKendrick (Arc Publications) £8**
Archway Sonnets, **Kate Bingham (New Walk Editions) £5**
Fighters, Losers, **Declan Ryan (New Walk Editions) £5**
Reviewed by Paul McLoughlin

The Years opens with a pair of unrhymed sonnets, the second of which sets out with a fine addition to my cache of favourite line breaks: 'A life of doing nothing is a life / well-lived' (which is almost as good as Bernard O'Donoghue's 'These days what fills me with the greatest / Sense of achievement is getting out / Of doing things', from another poem on ageing). McKendrick's poem is called 'Doing Nothing', a reversal of the opening 'Nothing Doing' in which a heron gazes with 'sheer disgust' at the water in a pool 'left undrained to shiver through the winter' where 'nothing moves that's worth a sprat'. In the sestet, the poet-speaker, whose 'quiff quivers' and whose 'beak / is sharp as a tack' shows that he not only empathises with but has become the heron. The turn gives us access to this metamorphosis: 'I know the feeling ... The world is a con'. This is a poet enjoying himself, his cleverness a delight, as is that of John Fuller, to whom O'Donoghue's poem, 'Getting Out', is dedicated.

The 'thurn-harrier' in the hybrid sonnet-villanelle of that name is a 'bailiff beetle' that earns its 'hire' evicting a mythical-fictitious creature (the thurn) by harrying it from its home. Once again the anthropomorphic-personification palimpsest is evident when the thurn stuffs 'pamphlets in his case', including, perhaps, the one we are reading. Perhaps again, 'The Lion-Tree', issuing from a mention in Pliny the Elder and looking nothing like a lion, is extinct because it grew 'tired of its existence'; a suicidal tree that leads us to Granada's 'Court of the Lions', whose complex, paradisal water system might contrast with the opening poem's pool but instead contrasts two visits by the poet-speaker, fifty years apart, in a short, evocative poem whose final line has his older heart vibrate 'to the murmur of marble, the patter of water', a reference to Ibn Zamrak's poem carved round the courtyard's basin.

By the time we reach the final poem's 'untranslated last line of *Paradiso*' we can consider ourselves widely travelled, in Europe at least, after a journey aided by myth (the Mersey's foghorns lead out to 'Neptune's harsh bassoon' while a courtyard in Milan is filled with 'Cerberus barking'), and humour ('Nero still playing Bach on his violin'), history (the same poem's 'scattered city rising from its ruins') and memory ('I can see them all, as if they'd just / gathered in red and grey for morning roll call'). All the recto single-page poems are accompanied by McKendrick's accomplished verso artwork. The pictures offer an intriguing visual commentary on the poems but may equally be regarded quite separately, something McKendrick approves of.

Bingham's 'Archway Sonnets' includes a poem about talking to a puddle (the second of a trio that started life as a three-part single poem), and there are others on clothes in a washing machine, fly-tipped debris, and dinner plates left on a wall ('cheap willow-pattern rip-offs left to take'). They are the stuff of comfortable life in desirable London postcodes. But what poems they make. Bingham's rhythmic ear is impeccable and she is so good with rhyme the reader stops to admire it. This is a chapbook of sonnets all written in the same form (abcd x 3, plus closing couplet) which, if not original, is deftly deployed. These are poems that tell of the mundane. I could delve for treasures (they are easily found) but better, I think, to quote one sonnet in full:

> Taller again this year, the garden roses
> no one seems to remember planting loom
> like neighbours, five or six feet over the pavement,
> yellows, reds and pinks at human height,
>
> nodding and beaming as I come and go,
> each cluster's colour doubled in the gloom
> of unlit living-room windows, each well-meant
> intrusion twice as curious and bright.
>
> All I have to do is show I notice
> their magnificent nosey blousy blooms
> for every flower to release its scent,
> as if a rose could put the world to rights,
>
> its tint illuminate June's moody weather,
> its unfolding head keep mine together.

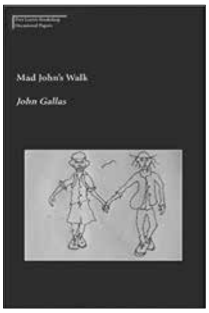
This is perfect, isn't it? Octave and sestet, a sentence each. And the conclusion's acceptance that looking and admiring do not in themselves put things right has something of Larkin's 'Love Songs in Age' about it, in meaning, syntax and tone.

It's a long way from an Archway postcode to the world of Declan Ryan's 'Fighters, Losers', a chapbook homage to American prize fighters. It opens and closes with poems about the lesser-known figures Diego 'Chico' Corrales and Jonathan Rendell. 'The Resurrection' shows us Corrales 'being borne aloft by his trainer and his cutman, / his arms stretched out crosswise, / celebrating coming back from the dead'. That Rendell 'boxed well enough to write about it' we learn from the poem that bears his name, and is attested to by one of the chapbook's epigraphs: 'I prefer losers. They're more self-aware'. We meet the expected Clay (and Ali), Marciano, Louis, Liston and Tyson but we do so in Lawrentian lines not to be found in sports pages; and Ryan is interested in more than physical pain. When Tyson is knocked out in an adoring Japan by the no-hoper Buster Douglas, whom he had floored earlier in the fight, 'Tyson will say / "I just stopped caring. / He got up. Nobody else had"'. Corrales dies :

> on the Fort Apache Road in Las Vegas,
> his Suzuki motorcycle in component parts,
> his license expired, his blood three times the legal alcohol limit.
> ‘Bottom line, no one else did anything wrong’,
> Sergeant Tracy McDonald will say, following a report. ‘He basically killed himself.’

Which is what the civilised world will always say. It’s become a brave subject. Those of us who bought *The Ring* and avidly pored over its numbered lists of contenders are in grave danger of being cancelled. The ostensibly looser, discursive lines of Ryan’s poems contrast with the more formal (though equally leisurely) compactness of McKendrick’s and with the uniform delicacy of Bingham’s sonnets, but all three poets are writing about what they notice and what they find themselves interested in, which is what poets do at their reliable best. The chapbooks are also a testament to the smaller publishing outlets they issue from.

Momently Carried Across



Mad John’s Walk, John Gallas (Five Leaves)
The King of the Lam, Greg Delanty (Southword Editions)
Satyress, Audrey Molloy (Southword Editions)
Parturition, Heather Treseler (Southword Editions)
Reviewed by Rory Waterman

Every couple of months, my beneficent masters at *PNR* Acres dispatch a big Jiffy bag full of pamphlets to me, and I leaf through them idly, between a cafetière and a recycling bin. A fair proportion are always evidently either plausible or good, so I sort those quite hastily into a ‘maybe’ pile and then spend too much of my time anxiously determining which deserve my column inches. But there is a third category, less common to *books* of poems, and overlapping the other two. Let us label it ‘fascinatingly odd’. When I come across some of the pamphlets in this misshapen group, I am reminded of the origins of the pamphlet or ‘chapbook’ in street literature, broadside ballads and unfashionable and unsanctioned political and personal outpourings, and sometimes I get really excited.

John Gallas’s *Mad John’s Walk* just about fits into this category, and comes from the press of Five Leaves Bookshop in Nottingham, which has a proudly radical political outlook and, by some estimations, the best poetry selection in the UK outside London. To introduce it, I may as well emulate the practice of some poetry reviewers at our only newspapers that still carry poetry reviews, and lean on the blurb – though I’ll quote rather than paraphrase: ‘In the autumn of 2016, poet John Gallas decided to follow the route taken by John Clare when he escaped from Matthew Allen’s High Beach Asylum in Epping Forest and made his way back to his home in Northborough. This pamphlet is a light-hearted account of that eighty-mile journey’. Gallas is habitually witty and warm, and indeed the pamphlet is as irreverent as one would expect. It begins with a poem in which he writes that:

> I threw myself into a stubbled field
> with half an apple and the Book of Clare
> to read a store of verslings midst the bees ...
> The hay
> stood stacked in stooks, and
> down the half-flowered twitch
> the planted pylons strod. So I began.

If this were just a silly pamphlet, though, there would be little to recommend it. What follows is an eight-page prose diary, really a diarised travel memoir-essay, as limpid as it is intellectually sprightly, interspersed with snippets of Clare’s poems, and tinged with elegiac sadness and self-deprecation, for all of its smiles. He knows there is no following in Clare’s footsteps, really: ‘I took a spare T-shirt, a spare pair of socks, a rollable raincoat, a hat, the Penguin *Clare*, a notebook and pen, and my iPod Fitness app, to measure each damned step along the way. John C. had old boots, and nothing else’. But the pamphlet’s glory is in the parallels as well as the divergences, and Gallas’s occasional cool insights: ‘If madness was missing, I felt still that I held his hand all the way, but that we did not talk about life. Sometimes, that is Poetry’. Or: ‘At Stevenage, I hurried through’. (Always wise.) ‘Leaving the town, on a hot, wide pavement, I saw a small orange lying in my way. I looked at it. What, I asked myself, would John Clare do? Naturally, I ate it’.

There isn’t much here for the national rambler’s association to purloin for marketing purposes: ‘I hurried down the main road into town, facing the terrible onslaught of rush hour. I leapt from tussock to weed along the roadside as cars driven with furious intent lifted my bag off my back each second in their slipstream. I longed for 1841’. (There are brief exceptions, such as when he pauses in a ‘Paradise’ where ‘poppies and birdsong wibbled on all sides’ and determines ‘to eat grass’.) But this pamphlet is as likely to inspire the imagination as it is unlikely to inspire wanderlust in the English countryside. The pamphlet ends with five very short poems, one for each day of the journey, wryly echoing the formal, thematic and linguistic properties of its inspiration:

> The wheat stands up, unbowed and new.
> The church stands up behind.
> I am the less contented kind,
> For all that God can do.
>
> It has its purpose and its law,
> And God has his Career;
> While I am left to wander here
> And wonder what I’m for.

I wish Gallas had thought to find a way to avoid both unnecessary uses of ‘up’, but taken as a whole this little poem encapsulates the tones of the pamphlet. It would be easy to have too much of this sort of thing, but Gallas keeps things brief, and I am confident that readers will come away thinking they have spent a good half hour with the Mad Johns.

Southward Editions, the publishing arm of Munster Literature Centre, has recently got into the habit of publishing several pamphlets a year, and in 2020 has given birth to impressive triplets, including Greg Delanty's *The King of the Lam*, a moving and often calmly removed set of elegies for the Irish-language poet Liam Ó Muirthile: 'We never finished our on-hold confabulation'. I'd also like to give a nod of appreciation to Audrey Molloy's *Satyress*, which is as sassy as its title implies. The prose poem 'A Brief History of Smoking' is a crisp nostalgic elegy, and an elegy for a time of nostalgia: 'On the nightstand, like a carriage clock, Dunhill's claret-and-gold pack; alas, now gone, replaced with images that would put you off coming.' She can also be more tersely and gently poignant, as in the exquisite 'Envy Is a Daylily', which ends: 'someone / once looked upon your life / wishing it were theirs'.

My pick of the three, though, is *Parturition* by the American Heather Treseler, who (like Molloy) is yet to publish a full collection. Treseler has a predilection for writing multi-page poems in long-lined, heavily enjambed couplets. She could clearly be a superbly inquisitive personal memoirist, but has for now decided to formulate her ideas into poems and has found a fitting verse form for them – though some of her enjambments ('Fabergé / Egg') feel like the product of an automatic line-cutting machine rather than poetic necessity. Most of these engrossing poems quantum leap around an anecdote, often regarding someone the poet apparently knows. The opener, 'Louisiana Requiem', begins: 'Eight months pregnant when your mother began hospice, / you sat in the driveway'. In order to give a flavour of her insistent style, it is necessary to quote at length, and this is from the poem's ensuing meditation, which is typically dense but rewards the careful thought it demands:

> And you are an entire country,
> an America, stretched impossibly across a Mason Dixon
>
> And two shores, nearing: the woman who bore you, daughter
> You will bear, your body a hinge between its history
>
> and future, an imperfect present tense. Scientist, dedicated
> to cool notice of detailed fact, resistant to the muddled
>
> logic of metaphor, you nonetheless find yourself borne
> across by likeness in otherwise radical difference:
>
> the shared violence that marks birth and death, mothering
> the grade that governs the latitudes of the in-between.

A common method of Treseler's is to wrap her poem's anecdotes in the experiences of someone else, so that we have one impression seen through another. Thus, in 'Skywalker':

> Years after recovery, you encounter a sinewy woman
> in a Lacan seminar who can't shut up about desire,
>
> drive, deferral, her eloquence a kind of death-flirting
> performance like Charles Blondin tightroping
>
> across Niagara in a blindfold.

Occasionally, she is more direct, but the poems are never less scrupulous – or vulnerable: 'For you, I have left my clothes on the floor', and am 'open to rapture or / metaphor: a chance to be momently carried across'.