

these explorations of the mystery of things, but an elegant seriousness from a poet who is not diffident in tacking his Anglican colours lightly to the mast, his fullest exploration of this position coming in 'Credo' where, despite all the historic obstacles, the pedantries and absurdities, the 'bleating synods' and 'churches filled with soft moans and cheery ditties', he can echo and accept the cry of the possessed boy's father in Mark: 'Lord, I believe: help thou my unbelief'. 'Tongues' and the airy 'Annunciation', which reminds me in its clarity and unfussiness of the Veneziano in the Fitzwilliam, are part of this theme, which finds its apogee in 'The Ark among the Flags', a memorable poem of weight carried weightlessly, which deserves quoting in its entirety:

All the abandoned, never found or claimed:  
The long-lost, nameless, scorned, or blackly named;  
The scapegoats, stoned and cast away and blamed

For nothing but their prayer-words or their skin,  
For being nothing but what they had always been,  
Made nothing because of some lost origin —

Picked up today in Exodus, and read  
Aloud again here, while centuries of dead  
Hear silently what goes on being done, and said.

Over and again these poems deal with the extraordinary pressure of lived life, the suffering and hopeful intensity of what we are pleased to call the past, its ashes, ghosts and fables being an astonishing and ever present accompaniment to the days we live in, while we try not to notice too carefully Larkin's priest and doctor 'In their long coats / Running over the fields'. As an editor, Anthony Thwaite has watched the fashions come and go; lines will be worn unrhymed this year, and capital letters to start them are *soo* last season – two fashions he does not care to subscribe to or accept as shibboleths; in 'Lustration' he writes in his archaeological persona, washing and sorting the fragments which have now lost 'All strict distinctions, measurements, the rites / Established and the uttered words' until his hands become as obdurate, adept at surviving, as the objects themselves. John Aubrey, the seventeenth-century antiquary, once wrote that his youth had consisted of 'ruins and umbrages'. Well, there are ruins here: in 'Orford Ness', that desolate memorial to the Cold War, a gull offers life above 'acres of degraded shingle / In process of continual ruination'; in 'String Quartet, New Buckenham Castle' the musicians' 'four frail instruments confront the ruined world / And all that is not ruined'. A strong sense of the bits-and-pieces ruins of time haunts the book: in 'Rising' we encounter 'The looted remnants torn and ditched' and voices reduced to 'Fragments of rage'; in 'On Tharston Bridge' – home territory – the river carries the poet's life 'all that happened long ago' but which has now become 'shatterings and sherds, / Not to be joined together', chasing and delaying, as the flowing image of 'water under the bridge' dominates the poem. As Gudgeon, the sardonic bookseller, says in Brian Aldiss's 'The Brightfount Diaries' (1955), 'A miscellaneous

collection of objects is man's only defence against time'. But Anthony Thwaite knows well in 'Time to Go' that 'Time was I kept some goods held back in store. / *Not any more, not any more*', and knows too, in 'Jubilee Lines', he will be, as we all shall, 'A small voice lost among the drifted years'. As for umbrages, it would be ridiculous to grow old without a few splendid umbrages. The best celebration of umbrage is the 'Prologue to an unfinished posthumous poem', with its swipes at 'hard careerists and soft triflers', the 'diurnal charlatans' of our times. Anthony Thwaite, however, whether grimacing in pain or muttering over his walking-stick, is emphatically not in victim-and-survivor territory, but jaunty not-drowning-but-waving territory, as is Hugo Williams.

This collection, which contain poems as fine as any he has written, is suggestive, not arcane; it works on the splendidly unfashionable assumption that words console and heal, that the poet's material is our fallen condition, and that writing poems is a properly human activity, not the creation of ambivalent texts for competitive poets to read or critics to evaluate.



### Elizabeth Davies *On taffeta, ferry rides and socks*

MADELEINE BECKMAN,  
*Hyacinths from the Wreckage*  
(Serving House Books) £8.77

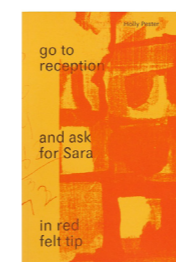
A poet who called her first collection *Dead Boy-friends* was always going to be a surprise read. In her third book *Hyacinths from the Wreckage*, Madeleine Beckman – New York poet and teacher – invites us on a dance through memory and time, sharing as she goes a particular window on American life.

Her first section introduces a Philadelphia childhood where her mother played centre stage. Here was a woman who bought her daughters taffeta dresses with money she should have spent on bread, taught them to appreciate opera, French cooking, lipstick and most of all to dream. In 'Cedar Road, 4<sup>th</sup> Grade' Beckman turns the shame she felt over her mother's eccentric hemming of her party dress into humour: 'Everyone laughed at my skirt, I told her. / Taking a drag on her cigarette, / she assured, They're just jealous /they didn't have staples too.' Her father appears a slightly more grounded presence, endlessly positive and advising his daughter, 'Be happy you have a seat on the ferry boat, be happy / you don't have to stand.' This approach brings Beckman through some poems describing her mother's decline, railing against diabetes, relieved by the kindness of relatives and restaurant staff, and at times her own witty quips. Interrupted during her favourite television programme by a nuisance caller her mother once responded, 'You know, I love talking / dirty, but could you call me back in 20

minutes? / The stranger hung up before she did.'

The book's second section concentrates on lovers and partners, where Beckman is startlingly honest about love and loss. Several critics have described her writing as sensual, and indeed it is wild, engaging and unflinching. Her ability to conjure a scene in fluid imagery is striking. She rows boats into desire, and lies above the Delaware River 'deep dark insistent as my feelings for you'. Some poems cover subjects so painful they will inevitably speak first to women and then to men who seek to understand them. On the domestic front, however, she made me laugh out loud. Completing a list of some dos and don'ts supplied by one of her partners, 'I don't fold my socks inside out / into little balls, I like them side by side folded flat.' Beckman explains, 'I saw the humor, almost.'

In the third section Beckman takes journeys in South America and Europe and in the fourth considers endurance. Not all Beckman's poems are from her own perspective, though few around can escape her gaze. There are couples she spots at Parisian restaurant tables or on New York buses, moulded by the years into each other, their commitment re-enacted in every gesture. One of the lovely things about these poems is that many of them contain a short story so that at each re-reading her characters and friends become more alive. This conveys her skill as well as her wish to connect, to be accessible, and to reach a wide audience. Much modern American writing seems deliberately negative. While Beckman does not avoid recalling 'the charred odor of flesh' in her own city, she chooses to find hope in the warm human side of America – the one that remembers old friends and honours immigrant grandparents. But then just as you think you are beginning to understand where she's going, she twists away like the dancer she is, as if following a sudden unexpected surge of electricity. Maybe she is the signature poem, 'Hyacinths': 'something dramatic was on the horizon / keeping her on edge, pushing / to a decision absolute resolute / persistent through paralysis / beyond the wreckage.' Maybe she's lighting the way ahead.



### Rebecca Varley-Winter *Endangered Species*

HOLLY PESTER, *Go to  
reception and ask for Sara in  
red felt tip* (Book Works) £12

I'm going to  
go downstairs in black felt tip  
turn right at Lamb Street in black felt tip  
go to reception and ask for sara in red felt tip

Created in the archives of the Women's Art Library, Holly Pester's *Go to reception and ask for Sara in red felt tip* uses 'anecdote as a method to generate [...] poetry, critical fictions and

literary fragments'. Printed on coloured paper like a giant office notepad, parts of the archive are collaged into subtly comic juxtapositions:

I feel  
auspiciously black and female  
erotic  
like an endangered species

Stanzas circle particular words or concepts from different angles, such as 'work':

Woman, Worker, Farmer  
Women's Crafts and Work  
I worked hard at school... they say I'm neurotic  
Women demand the right to work

Femininity becomes a lived environment, populated by repeated touchstones or clichés – craft, witchcraft, work, motherhood, pay, New Age imagery, embroidery, myth, colour – and idiosyncratic buzzwords ('tart art', 'Visual lesbians'). Occasionally the list breaks up, becomes hesitant, as if its speaker is trying to recall an itinerary:

The collapsed blue canopy of heaven  
um... er  
computers in the office

*Ask for Sara* also plays with ekphrasis:

Pauline, where should this go?  
It's a photo of a pregnant woman – where should it go?  
this photo is of a naked woman that she took  
of herself in the mirror

This reflects, in a funny way, the conspicuous female body, tip-toeing from margin to centre – 'where should it go?' – with deliberately awkward uncertainty, asking for permission.

The tone is mostly understated, so more pointed critiques stick out, as in 'Hard for Me and So Many':

Like some people's lives let's be brief and to the point. I had hepatitis.  
I had a nightmare where the planet was eaten by microbes. I do not expect you to transcribe the interview. Where I mention. How my health is damaged by years of domestic work and relative poverty. All the information I have left is for my daughter's passport application.

In this discontinuous archive – full of non-sequiturs, material detritus – it is hard to access any life whole. 'Secrets. The same as afterbirth. It all lands on the floor.' Holly Pester is not self-consciously lyrical, but creates moments of freewheeling, absurd vibrancy amid this torn-diary effect, as in this stanza from 'Slide'...

Soul! Burning! Flashes!  
Was I afraid?  
No, I had  
turned  
into  
a  
dog