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*THE MUD IS QUIET*. By Colin Kerr. Edinburgh: Chapman. 1993. pp. 64. £5.95. ISBN 0 906772 57 5.

*TELLING GESTURES*. By Joy Pitman. Edinburgh: Chapman. 1993. pp. 63. £5.95. ISBN 0 780906 772361

*CELLOS IN HELL*. By Jim C. Wilson. Edinburgh: Chapman. 1993. pp. 62. £5.95. ISBN 0 780906 772454.

These three poets reflect a contemplative tendency in modern Scottish poetry, as recently profiled in Daniel O' Rourke's *Dream State*. Universal themes are explored, including nature, the supernatural, human relationships and poetics.

*The Mud is Quiet* is a loosely connected, seven-part poetic cycle. *Preface* introduces the poet's family, nuclear and genealogical, and is followed by a tour through *Knowledge*, *Landscapes of mind & place*, *Time*, *Relationships*, to *Integration* and a *P.S.* Kerr is a religious education teacher, editing *Graffiti* magazine from 1984–88. Spiritual perspectives inform his work, from 'Anima' to 'Message in a Bottle':

Continually fill yourself  
with the wide open spaces

Don't let the past fester  
or become the future

The embryonic Messiah dreams, in 'Child and Madonna', of 'the world spinning / in the wrong direction'; Christ discovers Grace, in 'Easter Becomes Man', through 'the receptive landscape'.

Ideas are often focused through images of school or the sea. In 'Classroom Antics':

His chalkdust glove  
makes a silent  
mime  
there on the blackboard

Here, pupils participate in a 'lingering fight' to seek

a form of knowledge  
through which each

might dimly perceive  
an other

'Dark Tides' is a typically bleak vista:

There the midnight sea  
slowly lunges against the land  
upon those dark moonless tides

Sinister figures inhabit Kerr's landscapes. 'Seabird' recalls Ted Hughes: 'when gulping down through this saltspray / there is no more frightening flesh alive'.

The prevailing mood is melancholic and negative. In 'Historian', 'history implies something lost', not knowledge gained. Startling lyrical lines abound. At 'New Year': 'The mud is quiet / our frozen nostrils full'. In 'Corners of Night', 'the mattress became a futon to far-away stars'. A waterfall, in 'Walkabout' is 'a column of light-dust suspended / against the green'. Occasionally, unexpected flashes of humour enliven Kerr's sombre palette. A bus queue develops camaraderie with 'The Stranger'

I joked with him  
that this bus route  
he'd be pleased to hear had already crossed the Red Sea

To 'the other people ... he was a seagull'.

Despite its external scenes, *The Mud is Quiet* is intensely introspective. 'Poet's image' examines the creative process: 'a depth-charged image enlightening / as a frog splashes up through the mind'. 'Mapmaker' 'looks outwards through me' and:

I must sit  
thoughts twinkling  
until a course is plotted  
for there are the materials between us to make a map.

Ironically, there is no precise elucidation of Kerr's poetic purposes. Although 'Spellbound' intriguingly mentions a Whitmanesque 'bottomless / sense of I / that inhabits my chest', there is an unsatisfying lack of specificity.

By contrast, Joy Pitman (who contributed to *Graffiti*) is evocative and explicit. 'Rebirth' and 'depression' are disturbingly confessional. 'Five cynical songs' are witty psychological paradoxes:

let's be  
carefully  
care free

Pitman's humour is concise as Stevie Smith's. In 'Fantasy', for instance:

Each time I fantasise what I might say  
I'm sure of your reply  
But in reality you won't have learnt  
Your lines as well as I

Alan Taylor, introducing this selection, claims Pitman 'makes Sylvia Plath read like nursery rhymes'. 'Daddy' certainly echoes Plath's poem of that title, as well as Larkin's 'This Be the Verse':

Daddy, Daddy, how did you abuse me?  
Did you bugger me for real?  
Or only fuck me up  
The old familiar way?

There is a disquieting resilience in Pitman, though:

Thank you Daddy for the present  
For joy and pain and living,  
Your death a final birthday gift,  
A wake I'll go to dancing

Role models include 'Penelope', defining her borders with the clarity of Cassandra in Tessa Ransford's 'My Troy'. 'Labyrinth' combines sensitivity and self reliance:

For my Ariadne was a wise old witch  
Who gave m no threads to follow  
But taught me to trace back my footsteps

The Green Man is invoked in 'Fairytale' (as in Margaret Elphinstone's *An Apple from a Tree*). He helps a woman (Snow White here) assume responsibility for her actions: 'For here in the pain of my heart lies the key / Which will open the lock — I can set myself free'. So too, despite the 'bleak winter' of 'Merlindene — Fife', 'in me still thrusts life that will not take denial / a spring indomitable'.

Pitman's joy in nature is intense. 'Afternoon in the Botanics' is exuberant as a Georgia O'Keeffe study: 'exotic blooms of passion / lie open to the sun'. 'Elderberry Wine' combines sensual and metaphysical qualities:

Let's press the juices of this hour,  
Lay down communal wine,  
Enjoy, full-bodied and mature,  
Our seasonable vintage.

The harvest of my heart is ripe:  
Come, meet me now and gather.

The obverse is Pitman's awareness of offences against nature. A Burnsian 'meeting' has here and writer with 'locked eyes'. Their silent confrontation lasts until 'the hunter's distant gun' makes the animal flee. Pitman has the planet speak in 'Earth's Plea': 'Lusting for mastery of death, you, in your arrogance, / Have raped my secret depths, forged weapons from my fire'. Despite such treatment the ravaged earth offers possibilities for healing:

Come. Enter me naked, vulnerable, consenting;  
Descend the darkness, dare the burial chamber,  
Submit to death a willing victim.  
Perform the act of sacrifice: for I can heal, make whole.

Regeneration features, too, in Jim C. Wilson's *Cellos in Hell*. 'How Will I know spring' asserts: 'I can look for the trickling thaw / a pulse, a reawakening'. Wilson is equally interested in decay: 'In the Garden' features 'limp rhododendrons, / red as open wounds'. 'The Public Gardens Were Busy' is gloomier and less vigorous than Pitman's 'Botanics'. Mother and daughter lie listlessly; the only energy generated when: 'two gaunt dogs began to copulate'.

Bizarre individuals and their experiences abound. 'The Specialist' scorns buyers of 'Male Interest' magazines — 'soft / pink dolls for their hard desires' — preferring Mothercare catalogues. In 'Sarah and Teddy':

In the empty house Sarah took  
Teddy in her arms. She forced  
Mummy's lipstick to his stubborn  
cloth then made him look  
in the mirror; Teddy was shocked

Seeing Teddy, cold-creamed and powdered: "That bear was bloody dear!" yelled Mummy.' As Sarah purges Teddy under water, woman and toy are identified: "I christen thee Mummy".

Lyrical elements reflect Wilson's heroes: Elvis and Wordsworth. 'Solitary Way' explores the King's tragedy: 'Some said the Army was his death'. In middle age:

I'd have him to return  
if even just to sing soft rhymes  
to trained children and grinning dogs  
in Eden on Hawaii.

'At Wordsworth's Cottage' mourns the lost poet who 'wrote of revolutions'; now 'an industry; / your dear, dear sister / is a blank-eyes Dorothy doll'. Wryly, 'you might have warmed / to our swift turnstile efficiency'.

Love poems range from the bleak encounter of 'A Small Affair' to a tender tryst in 'The Student Flat'. In a shabby setting:

you blinked and

were surprised to see me that dawn  
in 1968 when rain  
made the roofs shine and I had lain  
beside you in a night as brief

as a smile

On a seedier level, 'Ulysses Resting at Corfu Airport' is a returning anti-hero, proud of minor triumphs:

foreign waiters conquered  
the Scottish girl he screwed. Now even  
his stormy bowels are deadly still.

Reversing Hugh McMillan's 'Making for Arcadia' (where a traveller anticipates Greece) Wilson's modern Ulysses 'dreams of his Penny in Wigan'.

A poetic credo is established. The title poem prefers, over harps of heaven and trumpets of Judgement Day, 'the lonely moan of / the cellos in hell'. In 'I fear', guiltily, 'Some poets lost teeth and waste away; their veins / run slow with ice and chemicals' whereas 'I pen a line or two'. The harp is not wholly rejected though. 'Creative Writing' (perhaps reflecting nine years lecturing at Telford College before full time writing) has a poetry group in discussion (with a nod to *Juno and the Paycock*): "And what is rhythm". 'Hadrian's haiku needs a few cuts' but, in a characteristically strong ending, 'later, slipping homewards in the train / a harp sings soft, unfingered, in my brain'.

Despite addressing similar subjects, then, these poets are stylistically diverse. Where Kerr is suggestive, Wilson is daringly idiosyncratic. Pitman's compelling integrity makes *Telling Gestures* the most successful of this ambitious Chapman trio.

*Glasgow*

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