

NOT LOST IN TRANSLATION

Christopher Reid. *A Scattering*. Oxford: Areté Books, 2009. *The Song of Lunch*. London: CBeditons, 2009.

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American readers, when they encounter it, may find postwar British poetry hard to enter for cultural reasons: Soured by the collapse of Empire, sidelined by the Second World War, given to understatement and self-deprecation, it can seem diminished by America's brash songs of itself. If, sympathetic to history's victims, we have adopted the Irish, and taken up Latin American and Central European poetry, we are far less likely to explore the post-1945 poetry of England, Scotland and Wales. The opposite, however, is not true: American poetry exports to Britain very well; American poets do star turns at British festivals, and are reviewed in the *TLS* and elsewhere. A balance of trade, one might say, ripe for correction, not least because we can access British poetry without the help of translations, which, however excellent, necessarily limit our understanding of more foreign cultures.

Christopher Reid has published one book in the U.S., *Mermaids Explained* (Harcourt), its poems selected by Charles Simic. Born in Hong Kong in 1949, Reid has been the poetry editor at Faber and Faber as well as Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Hull, city of Marvell and Larkin. The author—at last count—of 13 books of poetry (plus a couple for children), Reid's first books aligned him with the Martian poets (so-called for their outlandish imagery and Craig Raine's much anthologized "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home"), and he remains a Wit, with a fondness for personas and language play, but a Wit who makes the occasional foray into a more lyric, and, in glimpses, even pastoral, mode, always wittily shaped. Reid is also, as his 2003 collection *For and After* demonstrates, an excellent translator. One of his books, *Katerina Brac* (1985), purports to be a translation of the poems of a central European woman poet.

Reid has published three books in the past twelve months: His Mallarmé-an *A Box of Tricks for Anna Zyx* (with Ondt & Gracehoper, his own imprint); a mischievous mock-epic, *The Song of Lunch*; and *A Scattering*, which is a tribute to his wife, Lucinda Gane, who died in 2005. *A Scattering's* four elegiac sequences move chronologically, and with Reid's characteristic restraint, from the couple's last holiday together, during a respite in Gane's illness, to a poem called "Afterlife", in which Reid walks past the London institution to which she has willed her body "as if she couldn't bear not to be

busy and useful / after her death”:

‘That’s where my dead wife lives. I hope they’re treating
her kindly.’

The dark brick, the depthless windows, gave nothing away,
but the place seemed preferable to either Heaven or Hell,

Crete, with its “squeaky-wheel bird” and other quixotic fauna, is their Arcadia and the setting of the first sequence. The opening poem’s evocation of ancient idyll contains a warning note: “Blessed by the indifference of the creatures / ... we take our breakfast of coffee and yoghurt out in the sun”:

Even the sun, that more dangerous beast, has begun
his morning prowling in a spirit of negligent generosity,
not seeming to mind, or to want to murder us, much,
but laying the landscape out in its ancient
shapes and colours,
velvety ochres and greens on the steep hill,
a blue-green
glaze on the bay, as if to say,
‘These are my wares. Yours more or less for the asking.
Of course I accept your paltry currency, your small change
of days and hours.’

Even visually, Reid’s lyrics are admirable: long lines and short impeccably gauged, line breaks astute, with subtle internal and end-rhymes, painterly deployment of white space. From the skinny lines of the hospital’s free-verse sequence to the couplets of “Afterlife,” to the margin-to-margin sprawl of a poem on letting the garden go (“You wanted the garden to be a plenty, a plenitude: //...roses shoot everywhere”), the book is a compendium of the sort of poetic craft that looks deceptively easy to pull off: but the lucid surfaces, supported by lithe syntactical turns, though they feel artless, are consummate art. “Flowers in Wrong Weather,” in unobtrusive terza rima, begins:

Snowdrops, crocuses and hellebore,
which last year must have done their shy, brave thing
unobserved by me, are out again this year.

I was in the garden bagging
tree-trash the gales had flung down the week before.
No gardener, even I could tell the job needed doing.

A Scattering won Britain's prestigious Costa (formerly Whitbread) Book of the Year Award in 2009, only the fourth time this award has gone to a poet (Ted Hughes—whose *Letters* Reid edited—Douglas Dunn and Seamus Heaney also won it). In its poignancy, *A Scattering* is to some degree at odds with the ironic detachment of other Reid collections; it has a first person speaker, two of its sequences address a “you,” giving the book a feeling of intimacy as it constructs a portrait of a marriage, memorialized in both its balmy moments and under the threat of cancer. The exceptions to the “I-you” form of address come during the wife's last hospitalization, where she becomes “she,” a change which quietly underlines the imminence of separation, and in the third sequence, “A Widower's Dozen.”

Composed of eleven, short-lined, untitled poems, each a page long, the second, “hospital” sequence, unexpectedly plays backwards, from the death (“Sparse breaths, then none— / and it was done”) in the sequence's opening poem, to the ambulance trip to the hospice, in the last poem. The ambulance poem—which can't but recall Larkin's “Ambulances,” but here seen from the inside as the ambulance threads its way through London—is a single 35-line sentence ending—with rueful humor—on the word “champagne”:

So like a baby,
with her bald head
...
she proceeded first
to puzzle, then charm,
her attendants
...
till—how, I can't think—
they were onto the subject
of favourite drinks,
and no one objected
when she nominated
as the most delicious
of all, champagne.

Perhaps “lightness”—Calvino's *leggerezza*—is an apt description of Christopher Reid's craft. I sense that Reid, however distressed, may feel the note of despair should be muted, and undercut by wryness. So Reid's “Afterlife” closes as the speaker turns away from the anatomy lab to which his wife has willed her body: “But it's not a graveyard, to dawdle and remember and mope in, / and I had work to do, too, in a different part of town.” (Echoing Frost's “Out, Out—”?). In another poem, “Soul,” Reid seems to confess to

despair, then, in the next breath ward it off: “Never having known an emptiness so heavy, / I am inclined to call it my new-born soul.” This restraint, along with British irony of the sort Larkin practices, is an aspect of British poetry that Americans, used to the genial, loquaciousness of a Whitman or a Philip Levine, sometimes find difficult to grasp, but once the reader is attuned to it, it can be an extremely effective way of both admitting and deflecting emotion. The title poem, addressed to the reader, is similarly effective. Playing on the word “scattering,” it starts with a YouTube-ish clip:

I expect you’ve seen the footage: elephants,
 finding the bones of one of their own kind
 dropped by the wayside, picked clean by scavengers
 and the sun, then untidily left there,
 decide to do something about it.

Next the poem asks a question, “But what exactly?” which develops the narrative and poses what is part human, part an artistic problem: how to write elegy in the 21st century:

... They can’t, of course,
 reassemble the old elephant magnificence;
 they can’t even make a tidier heap. But they can
 hook up bones with their trunks and chuck them
 this way and that way. So they do.

And the fourth stanza concludes, inconclusively:

Elephants puzzling out
 the anagram of their own anatomy,
 elephants at their abstracted lamentations—
 may their spirit guide me as I place
 my own sad thoughts in new, hopeful arrangements.

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The Song of Lunch, Reid’s second new book, might be labeled postmodern picaresque—a revisionist, gender-tactful “Rape of the Lock”. Lunch with an old flame is plot-line and back-story; the unnamed protagonists are a “metropolitan dandy” and his lost love now married to a more successful, rival writer, and living in Paris (she turns up on the Eurostar). Posting a yellow sticky on “the dead black / of his computer screen,” the (mock) hero gives his co-editors the slip, shutting “the door on the sleeping dog / of his

own departure.” Flâneur extraordinaire—we’re in Bloomsbury—he heads for the rendez-vous-flashback to earlier trysts:

Keep your imagination peeled and see
 Virginia Woolf...
 At every twentieth step,
 she takes a sharp drag at a cigarette
 and pulls a tormented face
 as if she had never tasted anything
 so disgusting.

At the restaurant, however, not only is there no “straw swaddling” on the “mid-price Chianti,” but old discords resurface (“We said we wouldn’t look back”), not least when the once-beloved offers some straight talk about their relationship and a touch of unsolicited criticism of his one and only slim volume, of “wounded and weeping lyrics...[whose] sales scraped through to three figures”: a howl of almost Ginsbergian breadth. After a trip to the “Gents”—one of those redolent bits of British diction—the protagonist finds himself with a “view of brickwork and drainpipes” where, like Bottom, he falls asleep and dreams, but when he wakes the lady has gone. The restaurant is empty, except for the ghost of a “very old man: / ...rigid as a cadaver / from some Sicilian catacomb.”

Self-pitying, self-deprecating, the speaker exhibits his gifts as an anthropologist of social ritual:

parmesan shaved
 from a nubbly, fulvous block,
 a sesquipedalian peppermill waved
 by the nimble attendant...

connoisseur of his own foibles (“My god. You’re right. I’m sorry. / It’s the old male gaze // ...I was falling in love with your wrist.”) and those of his former lover, who

Chews, he observes,
 with less conspicuous relish
 than she used to.

Have all her appetites
 turned less lusty?

A page-turner, *The Song of Lunch* repays re-reading to savor the interior

mumblings of its narrator and his unflinching observations, the whole seasoned with a dash of literary Bloomsbury, circa 2000-and-something. The poem is sometimes rhymed, inconspicuously, but playfully: “view” pairs off with “Phew”; “Old time’s sake” with “a great big mistake”; and “nasty” with “antipasti.” More than slightly foreign in flavor—London is not New York, and not Paris—*Song* is not so foreign as to require a translator. A little like spending a weekend in a city with different mating customs, but a more or less shared language.