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## **Poetry of the Cornish Clay Pits: Clemo, Clay, Kent, and Goodman**

To those not brought up there, the first sighting of Cornwall's clay mining area comes as a shock. Pools and lakes of static, turquoise water, fringed by heather and wild rhododendron; stark white conical mountains with pulley systems draped to their peaks; vast areas of semi-liquid quartz laid like endless expanses of flat, sickly icing; and pits carved out by generations of miners into holes eight, nine, ten or more storeys deep, and just as wide. Into this area are squeezed a hundred villages and hamlets. These have supplied the workers to the mines, but have also witnessed the years of creeping incursion of the necessarily ever-expanding mines. Charles Causley, in his introduction to Jack Clemo's *Map of Clay*, calls it 'a white world dusted over with the colour of sex,' a striking enough image itself, and a world away from the coasts and cliffs and picturesque holiday coves of the visitors' Cornwall.

Poetry, we might think, would be more likely to emanate from the sunny beaches or the wild uplands than the grim, hacking and blasting of the clay works, those six miles square of raw industry. Yet three of the most vital and distinctive voices of twentieth and twenty-first century poetry have arisen out of this tight, sprawling area. And the poetry they have produced has been layered with the slime and dust and the mechanics of the china clay mining. There have been other poets who have emerged from this area, but these three epitomise the landscape and changing character of the place, the people and their characteristics, their traditions and their lives. And what raises the works of these three above merely descriptive commentary is the strength and validity of the meanings they invest in these bleak surroundings. Theirs is a fierce engagement of the self onto their surroundings.

For Jack Clemo this amounted to a vision. By turning his back on the bluebell woods at the foot of the valley and giving his attention to the zink-roofed sheds and upturned world of the clay excavation the other side of his small back garden, he found a metaphor for turmoil. The metaphor spread across turmoil both personal and universal.

Each poet creates his own set of rules. Clemo's were ideal for his purposes, but succeeding writers would need to throw off those rules in order to uncover their own formulations, suitable to their different climates and landscapes. This is what all artists do, building on what has gone before, but striking out in new directions, appropriate to their own personalities and perceptions of their varying world.

Clemo's first book of verse, *The Clay Verge*, was published in 1951 when he was thirty-five, making him seem a very late starter in the world of poetry. Alan M. Kent's first book of poetry was *Grunge*, a suitably iconoclastic riposte of a title, published in 1994 when Kent was 27 years old. *The Clay Verge* contained seventeen poems, only two of which seem unrelated directly to the surrounding clayland. In *Grunge*, Kent collects sixty-seven verses from his writing over the previous ten years. Although the topics tackled take him on a wider trajectory than the immediacy of the clay excavations around his home, the proximity of the mines can be spotted on most of the pages, and a whole section is devoted to 'Clay': eleven poems, including 'The Sound of Sand', 'Clay Euphemisms' and the 26-lines of homage, 'Meeting Jack Clemo', recounting the meeting at the house of a mutual friend in November 1992. 'That same substance touched us both', he writes; and recollecting shared experiences, he describes seeing 'bullrushes/ pushing from settling tanks' and 'prising powder from underneath nails'. Clemo's abiding metaphor, starker in the earlier verse than in the later more measured work, is of the innate sinful condition of 'nature': God and nature are at war; and therefore the works of God can best be identified with the machinery of destruction and

upheaval ('invasion', Clemo later called it) digging into and destroying the unredeemed grass and trees of farmland and countryside. The logic, of course, is that sin has warped nature just as much as it has mankind, and only God's intervention can restore the intended state of grace.

Just like Jack Clemo, Alan Kent was brought up in the arms of Methodism, though for him the fires which the older poet warned were then being left untended were perhaps, forty years later, nearing extinction. Kent's focus was always more diffuse, more catholic, than Clemo's, though the younger poet's particular vision has become more apparent as his writing has matured. Alan Kent's verse can perhaps be said to be an attempt to encapsulate 'the Matter of Cornwall', and has always employed both the wider geographical world and the particularities, the magic of the poetic process. That earliest collection, *Grunge*, contains verses on, or mention of Bosnia, Iraq, Germany, as well as the arresting 'Word Goblins'. 'A word holds a goblin', Kent informs us, 'The goblin is the barb of the thistle,/ the thorn of the rose'. 'Sometimes, goblins are only released/ when placed in dark corridors/ or between new words'. So they ungenerously reveal their meanings.

Clemo's response to the younger writer's output was to provide an insight he was anxious to quote on the back of his book: 'Alan M Kent's poems have the authentic tang which results from long and close contact with the settings and social milieu described'. Clemo's verses transform the physical surroundings; Kent's unlock the social settings.

The image of battle, exemplified by the continual blasting of the open-cast mining, cuts itself deep into this clayland poetry. For Clemo the battle is freshly engaged, hostile lines drawn and facing; for Alan Kent the battle is underway, swaying this way and that; James Goodman, coming to the field half a century on from Clemo's resounding opening salvo, seems to review the battlefield, and reckon up some of the losses. Is the battle over, lost or won, or simply moved to a different terrain?

James Goodman is a relative newcomer to the scene. His first book of verse, an extraordinarily prescient and evocative collection, published just last year, is entitled simply *Claytown*. The alternative possibility for a title was *Clay Dusk*, but *Claytown* focuses the wide experiences of the poet on St Austell, that 'town built from clay', as Alan Kent once dubbed it. Clemo, Kent and Goodman were all brought up within the perimeter of the clay area, and for each St Austell was *the* town. Jack Clemo lived in a worker's cottage in Goonamarris, a hamlet barely noticeable midway between Nanpean and St Stephen, and overshadowed by the growing Goonvean pit on one side, and the towering clay-dump of Bloomdale on the other. Alan Kent's childhood was spent at Foxhole, just a mile from Goonamarris. Foxhole sits on the junction where the wooded path from Goonamarris weaves past Barakellis and skirts Foxhole Beacon – the place where workable china clay was first unearthed in Britain – and meets the road from Nanpean through Goverseth Hill, going down to the A3058. The houses at Foxhole spread along the Goverseth road. Behind, and up beyond Watch Hill, lays the sprawl of the huge Blackpool clay pit. To the other side of the road can be seen the track of the clay railway snaking down to St Austell, and which also winds around Goonamarris. All three poets had family working for the clay industry, from one extreme, Clemo's father, a labourer and dry-man at Goonvean, to James Goodman's father, employed as a research and development scientist for the clay works at St Austell itself.

Goodman was brought up in the Gover Valley, barely much more than a mile from the centre of St Austell, in a house in the suburbs but with a view of the clay tips, and within a short walk to either Blackpool, Greensplat or Trenance pits. He sees his reaction to the clay area as romantic, meaning, I suppose, that it is largely through the imagination that he powers his verse rather than as direct expression of the harsh, everyday reality of face-to-face excavation. 'Romantic' is not, I think, the word a reader would instantly label his poems. Like Clemo and Kent his verse can be hard-nosed and scathingly honest. There's a toughness in these poets which seems born of the toughness of their environment. Their response can often be sharply direct, yet there is also often a lyricism producing an unexpectedly haunting quality, though they employ very different means to achieve these ends.

The changes to the industry and to its landscape are represented here across a span of more than half a century. But they represent, too, the changes to culture and the wider social milieu, uncovered by the lives and personal details where these three act as key witnesses, as our eyes and scribes.

Jack Clemo was born in 1916, in the middle of the war. An interrupted education at the local village school led to solitary scramblings around the clay pits and tips, and early bouts of deafness and blindness led to acute and morose introspection. He claimed that the clayland was all the world he ever needed, matching its many moods to his own. He drew from it, 'the beauty and symbolism in the clay landscape', but recognised that he found 'insight only at the point where sex and religion were fused'. For him the clayscape revealed the shapes of breasts and thighs. Then, just a month before his twenty-ninth birthday, he came back from wandering around the pits and wrote the poem which defined the beginnings of his serious verse, an echo of the searching he was struggling with. The opening lines of 'Christ in the Clay-Pit' proclaim both his isolation and his individualism: 'Why should I find Him here/ And not in a church, nor yet/ Where Nature heaves a breast'. Yet the everyday paraphernalia of the pit, the clanking filth and dirt are never lost in the transcendence of the vision. 'I see His blood/ In rusty stains on pit-props, waggon-frames/ Bristling with nails, not leaves.'

Just splintered wood and nails  
Were fairest blossoming for Him who speaks  
Where mica-silt outbreaks  
Like water from the side of His own clay  
In that strange day  
When He was pierced.

In 1961 Clemo reissued his *Clay Verge* collection, together with his 1951 Festival of Britain sequence 'The Wintry Priesthood' and a further set of verses, 'Frontier Signals', as *The Map of Clay*. This has undoubtedly been his most well-loved collection, arguing his case with man and God within the territory of the clay pits, and ending with 'Clay Phoenix', that defiant statement of faith carved out of a life of frustrations and reversals, yet holding not only to the early clay vision, but to a conviction of future harmony within marriage, and a repeated backdrop of explosions and deep excavations. 'Is this the end/ Of my pilgrimage and battle – the enigma/ Of lightning at noon, the quenched wires/ On my peak of vision, the glum dunes festering/ Amid smoke from pit-head fires?'

No, for I did not descend  
A narrow shaft for my truth.  
The bed is still broad, exposed to the changeful sky.

The latter part of *The Map of Clay* was written after he had become both deaf and blind, conditions he had been struggling with intermittently since childhood. So subsequent collections were all written under these dual disabilities, yet all of them contain his hallmark combination of faith and hope, even of well-being, a reaching for wholeness.

Poets employ the personal to stretch to the universal. Clemo is both more personal in his revelations, transcribing from his most intimate moods, and yet is more covert in their descriptions, often hiding the depth of emotion within the words. He digs into his soul, raises it painfully to the surface, and yet buries it inside metaphor: a camouflage which actually perhaps make him the most private of the three. His 1967 *Cactus on Carmel* is the most consistent and most complex of his later collections, and charts the beginning, the expansion, and the withdrawal of a romance that lasted three years. The turmoil and the disparities between the two parties is evident from many of the titles in the book: 'Eros in Exile', 'Outsider', 'Shattered', 'Exit', 'The Leper', 'Cactus in Clayscape'. And although his range of subjects and locations broadens out, 'clayscape' still provides the model for his metaphors:

'Heavy air from mouldering clay-hills/ Fills the arbour and threatens the embrace./ Nuptial bud at the lips/ Slips back into the natural stream'; and in his 'Confessional',

The signals were bannered with surf  
And winked blearily amid the rush  
Of pounding ironies.  
We were together, but I was bereft  
Of clay-bed and hope of tilth  
Within my sanctuary's hush.

I knew that this meant contact  
More massive than the inland rehearsals.  
I had come out to you with just the memory  
Of flat clay-pools, a friendly flare on the lip  
Between some bramble clumps. But on this outpost strip  
We were enclosed, withdrawn  
That I might prove my priesthood,  
And all familiar images had gone.

Beyond *Cactus on Carmel* Clemo published three further volumes of poetry until his highly influential *Selected Poems* was published, and two more after it, the last one being a posthumous collection, which came out a year after his death. Despite his blindness, and in face of the violently declared anti-nature stance of his early years, Charles Causley was able to nominate him as one of the finest landscape poets of his generation. Landscape itself, of course, was never the central point of Clemo's work. However compelling, however vibrant his descriptions, they were simply the physical base upon which he painted his 'preoccupations with the universal tensions of nature and divine grace'. For Clemo the clay landscape was a place of battle, for Kent a place of companionship, for Goodman a place of examination.

The daily alterations to the landscape represented for Clemo the erotic and the divine charge, for Kent they reveal community, the constant round of new ideas and people as they enter and leave and mark the stage. For Goodman too, the clayland is a metaphor for person, endlessly various and fascinating in its detail. So each poet portrays the land by individual means. Clemo's imagery is of the clash, the tussle, the iron machine that rips out the belly of the earth. Kent is more humourous, but darkly, slyly humourous. He sees what happens under the stone, but then he turns and shows it to a friend standing there with him, and he talks to him, sometimes quite naturally, in a Cornu-dialect. Is the poem brought down by such a usage? Not so; the language is elevated to the subject. Goodman sees, and writes it, differently. Each pit and dump, each crumb of clay-dust, is worthy of separate, painstaking notice, but the writing reflects the constant upheaval by the layering and excision and concision of his words. Each has shown how the way of writing mirrors the truth of the landscape, but even more accurately, the truth of the heart.

Andrew Symons, a friend to both poets, drew comparisons between the two older writers in his essay, 'Clemo, Kent & Clay' (*The Cornish Banner*, No 74, November 1993). Like Clemo with *Wilding Graft*, Alan Kent had preceded his first book of verse with his novel, *Clay*, and although it was their fiction which Symons concentrated on, his critical comments there can be applied equally to their poetry. The first surprise, Symons notes, is that any writer would have the temerity or the skill to tackle a landscape that had been worked over by such an individualistic vision as that of Jack Clemo. But Alan Kent captures it by clothing it in a very different personal guise. If his clayland is a place where he can celebrate companionship, it must also be a place of memory, and if memory then also of regret, and if regret then loss. And the loss is not only of people but of meaning, of cultural identity, of language, of place, of Cornishness; loss as theft. So, many of his poems are poems about or for friends. They mark a moment, but mark its passing. The poem is a means of holding on, even, hopefully, reclaiming. Titles from that first collection include such headings as 'The

Sand Beneath Our Feet’, ‘Scrambling For Meaning’, ‘Return to Carrick Roads’, ‘The Dead at Nanpean’, ‘Sonnet of a Man’s Aching’, ‘For What Could Have Been, Had...’ The brunt of the offence must be laid to the English; but the Cornish must take responsibility for their complicity: ‘I blame the Cornish too, for selling out’.

*Grunge* appeared in 1994, the year of Jack Clemo’s death. Both of the older poets produced a range of writings. Over his lifetime, Clemo published eight collections of verse, two novels, biography, stories, and an account of personal theology. To date Kent has notched up as many novels, and eight books of poetry, plus travelogue, dramas, essays, and some key anthologies and critical assessments. In his essential survey, *The Literature of Cornwall*, he assigns Clemo to the forefront of the strike against romanticism, or again, possibly even at its apogee. A poet can often seem to be at both ends of the tide, sometimes at the same time, and sometimes within the same poem. Two of the descriptive adjectives Kent sets out to describe Clemo’s writing are ‘idiosyncratic’ and ‘uncompromising’, and suggests that the uncompromising nature of Clemo’s art is also the cause of his supposed ‘inaccessibility’; yet, ‘uncompromising’ could also be assigned to Kent’s own work – and to Goodman’s. It’s what gives them stability.

Each of our poets aims to provoke; though, again, they do it in markedly different ways, and reveal both their different characters and the variety of their aims. Reading the verse of any of them can be an unsettling experience. Clemo slashes at the flowers and eulogises the digger; Kent takes you by the arm and makes you experience things you might prefer to shy away from; Goodman lays out the evidence and compels recognition of complicity. Each says you, the reader, must respond.

Clemao:           ...but where  
Should I find my personal pulse of prayer  
If I turned from the broken, scarred  
And unkempt land, the hard  
Contours of dogma, colourless hills?  
Is there a flower that thrills  
Like frayed rope? Is there grass  
That cools like gravel, and are there streams  
Which murmur as clay-silt does that Christ redeems?

Kent:             Yet all pasts turn on you.  
They are selfish children.  
  
They bite and savage the hand  
that feeds and gives love.  
  
Past pangs eat at me  
like sugar rushes of time.  
  
Unending memory.  
It is the curse of my nation.

Goodman:       *We have yet to harness the full potential of clouds*

he said, and there they were, brazen, tripping over the brow, utterly free in their stream, *our Government will seize them and privatise them and they’ll be tradeable property.*

If these excerpts sound more like belligerent manifestos than poetry, remember that they do represent the core of each writer. However diverse their products are, these are the centres about which they circle. In his 1993 article Symons identifies the common ground between Clemo and Kent as the use of the symbols of clay for identifying shades of fate and

tragedy, yet Kent, he says, expands both incident and style beyond Clemo's range, first in fiction, and then in verse. Both inspired, he notes Clemo saying, "by the same weird landscape," though the older poet accurately notes the stability fed by the roots he had put down in Christianity. This steadfast conviction provided security within which he could examine the world. It was, of course, a single stance. Alan Kent ('Somehow, on the way, Methodism got slaughtered'), unencumbered, is free to rove around, mentally and poetically, wherever he wills. A poet speaks to, and for, his age; and this change is both a reaction to the earlier generation and a product of the newer one. It marks a change to the national culture.

A year after *Grunge*, Kent published *Out of the Ordinalia*, a torrent of five hundred rhyming couplets creating a constantly shifting compendium of dreams and conversations with figures from history, reaching back half a millennium, with the poet fighting to reclaim an inheritance. *The Hensbarrow Homilies* followed in 2002, together with one of his richest and broadest collections, *Love and Seaweed*. The thirty poems in this collection contain some of Kent's most sustained and deeply realised writing.

Still writing about their fiction, Andrew Symons nonetheless identifies comparisons appropriate to their verse writing. Clemo, he says, is a son of the previous century (every serious poet of the early 1900s was reacting to the great Victorian masters) in the way he lays out his script; Kent reflects 'the increasingly fractured state of late C20 society' in style and structure. That would also be a reaction to the difference of the worlds into which they were born. Clemo was considered radical enough in his day, and aspects of his verse still have the power to shock and haunt. One of Symons' other indicators of difference is with regard to the use of dialect. Clemo introduces it in his fiction, and employs it very occasionally in his verse. For Kent it is a part of his own, and therefore of Cornwall's identity, and he uses it not simply for the voice of the peasant, the rough or the uneducated (though he can do that too, often with both jocular and pointed effect), but as a distancing – taking us back to a previous time; and as a closing of distance – the voice is very now, and in our ear. As Symons says, the speech he has to play with is in process of degenerating from dialect into slang. But that is part of the fracture which Kent addresses, and uses, and in his hands it becomes a totem of continuity.

When I stanked on down Stippy Stappy way  
I saw the broad glint in my father's eye,  
when up came miners, four and twenty say  
who sang 'The White Rose' from sweet sea to sky.  
You'd ne'er think this chappie was s'happy  
when I stanked on down steep Stippy Stappy.

The clay landscape shows a harsh, unrelenting terrain, and a poet must reflect it with appropriate language. Clemo, staring down into the huge Delabole pit, recoils from its 'cold inferno, breathing a foreign climate/ More remote from my building mind/ Than the weirdest neurotic sculpture'. James Goodman has a cooler, more pensive reaction to the Hensbarrow moor: 'Cancarrow's mountain of dirty salt – the tideline of black gorse and clitter – the grim reflection of sky'. Alan Kent's perspective is, again, more often seen amongst the clutter of personal and associative memories, as in the recollection of the glimpse from the passing coach of 'grim Goonvean/ – a no man's land of barbed wire and slurry'.

Following *Love and Seaweed* in 2002, Kent has produced three further volumes of verse whose titles alone reveal the persistence of his major themes of language, culture, and history – and, indeed, the persistence of a wry wit in which to couch them. *Assassin of Grammar* came out in 2005, *Stannary Parliament* in 2006, and *Druid Offsetting* in 2008. The hundred and ten poems collected in these three books show Kent's deepening understanding of his subjects and the greater facility he has gained in poetic expression. Like Clemo and Goodman he exhibits a wide range of forms, experimental and traditional, always attempting to press beyond convention. His stylistic expressions are perhaps the most varied.

After trying out a number of other forms Clemo created the approach that he adopted for most of his verses and seemed most natural to his needs. He developed a verse of uneven

lines and irregular, subtle, often surprising, rhymes. This created the rhythm reflecting his own voice and imagery. Kent, too, has shown a steadily individual voice, with a conversational tone leading most of his verse. The lines can often seem throwaway, 'Too far gone t'be done up yew./ Too isolated t'be found too./ This is the unadulterated west', yet have a potent sting in them. 'Now amongst collapsed beams,/ robbed lintels and stripped slate,/ these walls speak Cornish to me.' His forms are as various as his subjects.

Every poet who carries a distinct landscape runs obvious risks. There is a more immediate public response to descriptions of scenery, and especially portrayals of home scenery. But the popularity engendered by purely landscape verse can tempt the writer into repeated variations of the scene until he becomes parochial, a mere 'local poet'. None of these poets fall for that one. Resolutely Cornish, and with pin-point locations, they nonetheless extended the range of their sights by seeing themselves in a far wider universe. Imaginings and travels have fed each of their sensibilities. Clemo, famously, never went abroad until 1987 when he was 71, the first of two visits to Italy which, in the footsteps of the Brownings, produced a new flowering of rich verse. Long before that, though, he had ventured even further afield in experiments which offered portraits of other people, people from other times and other lands. From poems in his Festival of Britain sequence where he engaged with a number of key figures who had influenced his thought, his subsequent forty-odd years of writing found him entering inside the skulls of historic characters with whom he felt an intellectual or spiritual affinity. In such inventions Clemo found new aspects of his own identity, and it is interesting to note that these poems all convey surrounding landscapes, whether they be Japan, Germany, the United States, Africa, South America, or wherever. Landscape was always integral to image.

In Clemo the landscape is more often empty, with just the isolated figure of the poet in it. Kent's landscapes seem crowded: a gang, a party, a family jostling about. In Goodman's verse, the poet most often seems to be part of a team, with the poem arising from a sensibility integral to his own part of the joint project. Location, if not landscape, is as central to the other poets as it is to Clemo. That second visit to Italy, to Florence, took place in 1993, the year before his death, and resulted in the final volume, *The Cured Arno*. The Arno, in its 'sick' state 'turned to cadaverous mud - / As art does when proudly scorning/ Heaven's grace'; an image which surely carries a memory of the clay works.

Travels for the other two began much earlier in their lives, and those wider first-hand landscapes feature in their works from the start. An invitation in 1992 to be guest at the Freiburg Festival of Writing has Alan Kent recalling

I act the English abroad (a natural state almost)  
while you tell me your astounding stories –  
you reading Jane Austen in English aged twelve,  
while the 'O' Level German recall goes badly.  
In fact, not at all.

From his most recent collection, and visits to the USA and Australia, he notes an unexpected comparison, looking out across the land at Burra Burra:

This could be Hensbarrow's green down,  
a re-emerged Halvigan or Karlake  
from the slough of Blackpool's billabong.  
From here, by Morphett's Enginehouse,  
it is a St Dennis down under,  
not of clay, granite and mica,  
but copper, dust and bright sun.

James Goodman's travels are equally varied. Teaching English first in Istanbul and then in northern Japan, he moved to London in 1998, and now works for a sustainable development agency. He lives in Hertfordshire with his wife and their son. His book,

*Claytown*, is a collection of almost fifty poems. Whilst only perhaps fifteen are located specifically in Cornwall, landscape and its meaning - its reading - is spread across the entire book. The shortest poem is contained in a mere twenty-five words; the two longest poems, 'White Hill' and 'Shark Watching' cover six and thirteen pages respectively. And these are two of the verses located in a Cornish setting. Even though only a few more than a quarter of the verses are drawn from Cornish or clay dioramas, and despite the layout and themes of the poems being sixty years and some generations beyond the first of our three poets, Goodman has said, "There's a lot of Clemo here".

The form of Goodman's verses is strikingly distinctive. Although there is no single layout common across the book, every poem is a stark, imaginative, and stripped-down prize. To use a clay-land metaphor, there is a sparkling, quartz-like quality to each poem. He achieves this by paring away at the description until only the essence is available. This means that our work as reader is to recognise the labour and to share in what has been discovered. So much stripping down leaves gaps and spaces, empty lines between the printed lines. 'Painting the Clay' begins,

white with a hint of gorse-tinder  
white with a hint of machine oil  
white with a rhododendron gloss  
white with a hint of clay-rock canyon  
white with a hint of peacock butterfly  
on a glint of quartz

So there's that glint just tumbling out. The 'spread' of Goodman's landscapes might often be compared to the spreading out on a surgeon's operating table. Whatever tools that Clemo or Kent might have used to create their poems, Goodman's is a fine dissecting knife. If Clemo is an evangelist, and Kent an historian, then Goodman is an ecologist, and this transit across the generations reflects the move in society's beliefs, from the spiritual towards the material. For Clemo the pagan was something to confess and to fight; for Kent it was an idea to be played with occasionally; for Goodman it is, I suspect, a dead frivolity. Clemo is a preacher, Kent an archaeologist, and Goodman a scientist. His 'OS (slight return)' concludes, 'fate works its parts-per-billion, surging up the food chain,/ accumulating blood lines, jiggling veins off course// information not available in uncoloured areas'.

Penelope Shuttle provides a link across from the older to the younger poet. Taking down from her shelves the 1951 poems of Jack Clemo she recognises again his 'withering integrity and unflinching seriousness'. Endorsing James Goodman she calls his collection, 'An exciting and thoughtful debut', 'shot through with tough and compelling lyricism'.

Where the two younger poets separate off most distinctly from the older is in schooling. Jack Clemo left school at the age of thirteen. Kent's and Goodman's university degrees provided them with a much wider introduction to the world. Yet Clemo holds his own against these new contenders. What unites the three of them historically and geographically, of course, is the clay mining landscape. What unites the quality of their writing is the full concentration on their subject and its clear distillation into lines of meaning; the integrity of commitment – Clemo with his craggy, unkempt lines, Kent with his clash of voices, Goodman with his spare, picked bones of imagery. In one poem Goodman traces back up the path of the Fal. The fourth and fifth stanzas read

darkness in a bowl of sky. At tidal reach,  
the loud sibilants of Sett Bridge  
wake it, and the water stops and slacks –

though a rumour of salt works on up  
following the stream through cowfields  
curling through the trackless mesh of woods

Jack Clemo was born in 1916. Alan Kent was born in 1967 and, although his appearance as a poet makes it look like he might be a further generation on, James Goodman is only five years younger than Kent, and born in 1972. It is their books which mark a generational distance, sharpened by distinctions of style. Each gains by being compared against the others. Here are three diverse, but overlapping, responses to the clay world. For Clemo the space is a place of battle; for Kent a place of heritage; for Goodman a place of experiment, a laboratory; and the mechanics of their writing echo such differences. The theme that unites them is loss, loss of ground: loss of faith; loss of heritage; loss of surroundings.

Goodman's poem with the same title as Clemo's collection of 1951 and 1961 poems, *The Map of Clay*, is both a homage and an ironical re-examination, a heart-felt cry which is both passionate and dispassionate. Its opening runs,

Tips, transmission mast  
china clay works (dis)  
dismantd rly, disused workings  
adit (dis), disused workings

China Clay Works (disused)  
tip, tip, pit (dis)  
FB, resr, quarry (dis)  
Experimental Seeding Grounds

That move out beyond the clay world can often coincide with the more lyrical expressions of the poets' art. Each can resurrect the idea of the poem as a near-numinous experience. Each poem has a human scale and a human response, and the beauty can often be in the recognition of the poet's weakness, his smallness, in the face of experience.

Jack Clemo reflects on the tensions encountered in searching for meaning, in the conclusion of his Florentine poem, 'Headway':

You see the surface advance,  
Gifts of cold probing, invention,  
Or wiser grounding in politics;  
But the heart stays vulnerable, in flux,  
Or prone to an off-centre pull.

In *Love and Seaweed*, Alan Kent's poem 'Ode to Mogueriec' reflects on the Brittany coast,

Mogueriec, Mogueriec,  
Where rock and sea run wild and wet.  
Mogueriec, Mogueriec,  
A place, a space where time is tacit.

James Goodman's collection in *Claytown* includes poems on birds. 'Avian' has a verse for the starling:

What's left is turned to wavelength  
of gristle, sputum, spasm, glister, mucus,  
tendon, glimmer, sky and shimmer.

Clemo's poetic journey is over – though he is not silent. He signed off in his posthumous Italy-themed volume with a return to the cottage where he had been born and had lived for all but the last ten years of his life, to measure the distance he had journeyed. Kent and Goodman will continue to produce verse and will surely continue to expand their range and extend poetic practice. Art, perhaps, like true faith, should, in Clemo's words, 'mature without discarding'.

**Selected titles:**

Jack Clemo, *Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1988)

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