

Reviews



Alison Stump: Piano

Alison Stump originally studied Sculpture at The Brera Academy in Milan. Upon returning to London, she continued painting and life-drawing whilst having a career in interior design. She discovered print-making soon after moving to Cranbrook, Kent. Her work is inspired by her family, everyday objects and stories. Collagraph is her preferred medium as it allows her to produce a rich textured finish. The lines are uneven and naive in style, her focus being the suggestion of form. Her work can be seen at The Dark Horse Gallery, Mayfield, West End House Gallery, Smarden and the Blue Moon Gallery, Tunbridge Wells.

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Simon Jenner

Robert Nye *An Almost Dancer* (Greenwich Exchange, 2012, £9.99 hardback, £7.99 paperback)

Robert Nye (1939) has been called one of the truest and purest poetic voices of his generation, or subsequently. The Cholmondeley Award he received in 2007 was more cleanly and less automatically earned than has been the case.

He determinedly avoids the mainstream, wrote acclaimed novels for over 30 years like *Falstaff* (1976) famously burned in Reading University Library, and *The Voyage of the Destiny* (1982) and *The Late Mr Shakespeare* (1998) his final novel. But his calling and core excellence has always been poetry, which is recognized, too quietly for media or poetry scene attention. This is partly his fault: he lives semi-reclusive in Ireland, has been a very successful novelist yet retired from that; has written just criticism, as well as humbling scholars in debate. Four things to damn him, for a few years.

Nye's *Collected Poems* came out several times, but the latest edition, a *New and Selected* with his incessant felicitous revisions, dates from 2005, *The Rain and the Glass*. His subsequent collection *An Almost Dancer* (Greenwich Exchange, 2012) draws on nearly all – but irritatingly not all – the poems he's published since. The omissions can be remedied by recourse to the TLS, and is a small blemish. It seems publisher James Hodgson objected to the lubricity of some of Nye's recent poems, although the TLS had seen fit to publish them. Hodgson, editor as well as publisher, is a fine 1890s scholar and it's a startling misjudgement he's probably already regretted; and to be remedied I trust in a later *Collected Poems*. This selection does however usefully collect critical garlands of nearly two pages at the back, which positions Nye for new readers. And it gathers nearly all of Nye's poems since 2005. Here is the title poem:

An Almost Dancer

Once, on a hill in Wales, one summer's day
I almost danced for what I thought was joy.

An hour or more I'd lain there on my back
Watching the clouds as I gazed dreaming up.

As I lay there I heard a skylark sing
A song so sweet it touched the edge of pain.

I dreamt my hair was one with all the leaves
And that my legs sent shoots into the earth.

Laughing awake, I lay there in the sun
And knew that there was nothing to be known.

Small wonder then that when I stood upright
I felt like dancing. Oh, I almost danced,

I almost danced for joy, I almost did.
But some do not, and there's an end of it.

One night no doubt I shall lie down for good
And when I do perhaps I'll dance at last.

Meanwhile I keep this memory of that day
I was an almost dancer, once, in Wales.

This is typically epiphanic and as typically wry. The title naturally warns us but the adjectival caution doesn't detract from the headlong nature of the noun. There's some affinity with David Gascoyne's early 'Poem' of 1933, though without its angst around 'the threshold of vertiginous summer' where 'I flung this foursquare body down'. The affinities persist but attest curiously to the fact that Nye has been doing rather more of this than Gascoyne. It's typical too that the magical narrative leads into the quotidian fact of - however magically endowed - 'some do not' as Ford Madox Ford also said and 'there's an end of it.' It isn't of course since Nye invokes an afterlife of possibilities, including dance. The poem sashays its way through naturalism, magical assertion, blunt personal limitation, and possible transcendent resurrection. The wryness is all. You believe him; or you ought to.

As Andrew McCulloch in the TLS has suggested about this poem, Shelley holds no monopoly on skylarks. McCulloch also attests to G. S. Fraser's praise of the young Nye's leaning into a poem, his being a 'secretary of hidden powers.. nothing demands more delicate and conscious shaping than a true lyrical poem'. Nye's truest (if occasionally gruff) reader was his old friend Martin Seymour-Smith, who confirmed for Nye - when the latter was just 16 - the lyric spareness he was born with was a true gift, and introduced him to Robert Graves and (vicariously) Laura Riding, with different results, but who themselves also reinforced Nye's refusal to reach for afflatus: post-romantic or post-Movement ration book, unwieldy metaphor, or anything but the spareness differently honoured by each. Here is the opening of Nye's elegy for Seymour-Smith, 'Valentinus':

Yes, I knew Valentinus from my youth.
He taught me poets have to tell the truth
Or try to, though it make us seem uncouth.

You find this foolish? Lady, so did he,
Laughing at his own verses, teaching me
To laugh at mine or simply let them be.

Not that it's ever simple to make sense
At least when living in the present tense,
Or to be more than your intelligence.

This recalls not only Nye's but - for those who knew and now read him - Seymour-Smith's precise talk. The admonition 'to be more than your intelligence' is something clearly apprehended if elusive. It recalls too Seymour-Smith's praise for fusion of sensibility with intelligence (and the poem ends with tears of recognition), but also for that listening out, the by-passing of intelligence to find it in lyric forms not answerable in straight prose. Nye layers his audience with a veneer-maker's economy. He genders the interlocutor, lending her an unwonted patina of Donnean dust: though doubtless some poets still 'lady' their addressees, the effect is deliberately positioning epochs. The title suggests some 17th century soubriquet, and Seymour-Smith's Renaissance Man scholarship in so many epochs isn't in doubt.

II

Nye's scholarship is something he wears lightly and almost denies. In fact he refracts it through smelly ghosts and the imagination to produce such snotty-nosed gems as these:

I've never seen the ghost of Chatterton
But sometimes I have smelt it, sharp as day:
A scent half smegma and half innocence
Like the stale-almond sweetness of the may.

Another fragrance might be Seymour-Smith's stale pipe and sweetness of single Speyside. He was a bantam weight boxing champion in the army, and one's tempted to suggest he obliquely turns up as Keats (they were of a height). This is 'The Knock-Out'; where Cowden Clarke recalls his old pupil John Keats reliving with relish his own encounter of a boxing match: 'the champion drops / But first he spins, eyes rolling in a swoon / Of sweet obliteration ', ending

His nightingale sings on of course, but I
Prefer remembering his commentary
On that young boxer's quick three punches, plain
Poetry as his fingers tap the pane.

Cowden Clarke always talked up the 'manly' Keats to counterblast Shelley's 'Adonais', and Nye's poem captures Regency speech and the narrator. There are wholly different sporting memories in 'The Gambler' about his father's passing on the horse-betting gene to his son who was known for it. The variety and pitch of the volume is greater perhaps than any of Nye's previous, encapsulating memory, childhood, art, death, dead poets and dead horses, bees and poets (Hopkins!) and indeed eroticism as major themes. At which point poems placed on Hodgson's Pater-wracked codex should at least be mentioned. Here's the opening of 'The Guitar Lesson' subtitled 'After Balthus':

The girl lies stretched out on her teacher's lap
Herself the instrument for playing now,
Her frock rucked up, her knickers off, one hand
Flailing the floor beside the brittle strings
She has abandoned for this ecstasy
Of music-making in a secret room
Where none can see or hear them except us.

The disturbed image of Balthus, controversial enough, has not invited many interpreters from the 'After' school of polite paintings poets (they painlessly swerved Kingsley Amis's blast at them in the fifties). It's too disturbing for nervous deconstructive liberals too. Nye is more cunning in his empathy, moving through the painting to the subject, the painter and the girl portrayed (not the same as the subject at all). It begins in depicting Balthus as Balthus might have wished to depict himself; it ends though:

Balthus confessed it smelt of sulphur,
This scene from the inferno of desire
And yet in painting it his inspiration
Seems to have been a quattrocento pieta,
Which makes his girl guitar a kind of Christ.
Conspiring with the real, so Artaud said,
He uses sex to crucify us better.

But what about the girl? Such metaphysics
Leaves out of all account her mortal look.
Her eyes are almost shut, her lips just open
As if to cry for mercy or dispatch.
What she might say should be our only theme
Who gaze upon her as the woman does
With the half-smile of Bluebeard in his rage.

This reminds us that narrative as well as lyric is in Nye's gift and that one of his novels was *Gilles de Rais* (1990). The movement from sex as neo-paedophilic voyeurism to meta-sex and existential suffering is exquisite and seamlessly wrought. Nye packs in a wide scholarship without pedantry or losing his unease or uneasy itch. It's the sort of thing one finds in his novels but pitched to a jittery sublimity. No-one else would have dared essay this theme, let alone lead it through such insight without descending into tittering pornography or stepped back into appalled self-judgement – which Nye also gets in without slipping off the blues of his own guitar.

Nye's voice as such has - without recourse to iron-wrought syntax or glacial patterns of narrative - changed less over the years than many contemporaries. What has changed is the listener in the act of listening; the time-wrought shudder that first lashes then remorsefully leaves the poet. Nye's attention to the natural world is clear, but the act of listening as one ages, the joke on oneself, is clearer with each collection.

III

Nye's exact knowledge of Shakespeare's London or the natural world is pared down to a verbal simplicity that is pellucid, haunted and holds attention because of the power in its economy. His final novel *The Late Mr Shakespeare* boasts a central character Pickleherring, a boy actor for Shakespeare, now writing a fire is about to engulf London in 1666. So 'Request' the last poem in the collection revisits Nye's boy and man hero and omega self:

... It's where I lived
When I was nearly happy, years ago.
I beg you, sir, for the sweet love of Christ,
Tell me the way to Pickle Herring Street.

Much has been written about such economy, about such paring-away, in the modernist (Ungaretti, Celan) or post-modern sense, that now pervades poetry workshops. Doubtless useful. But when confronting a Nye poem, such commentaries become a little more meaningless.

The paring away in this collection holds that valedictory charge one finds quietly blazing in volumes proclaimed as final, and this Nye suggests will be his last, after debilitating illness. At the comparatively young age of 73 Nye it's hoped will be proved wrong. So to begin with endings (the last written of these poems) 'Instructions for a Burial' Nye commences:

Bury me in a rut on clay pit Hill
In a cardboard box to let the worms in quick

But of course a rut is not where Nye ends, even if his body does:

A few pewits as mourners would be good
But if they have some better thing to do
Then I forgive them, as I now forgive
All those who trespass against me and tramp
Over the queer grave where my corpse decays
Stuck on a rut on top of Clay Pit Hill.

Still more moving is another self-explanatory poem, 'In Still Winter':

Now at the edge of consciousness
I could believe that more or less
Each babe's that's born, from its first cry,
Is God demanding, 'Who am I?'

Though some men, dying, ask the same,
And cry to Christ for why they came.

Transcendence needn't be so painful. Nye is a comic novelist, though it's a pretty transcendent comedy he invokes. Comedy grounds it. Nye would endorse T. E. Hulme's now quaint 'I shall call my book Valet to the Absolute: the absolute not a hero to his own valet.' This divined comedy in the broadest (not funny, and Dante comes into it) sense erupts most in 'Bicycling with Birds', 'Mentchikoffs', 'In Still Winter' and in the title poem. As James Aitchison notes in the *London Magazine*, 'Drinking Hot Chocolate in the Rain' starts in a cardboard cup and soars:

There in the market by the coffee-stall
I saw the world turned inside-out. The rain
Flew upwards like so many crystal sparks
Returning to the glory of the sun
As I drank my dark chocolate to the dregs.

This, this is ecstasy, to stand and drink
Hot chocolate in the rain, lost in a crowd
Of strangers, and to feel for them such love
As Dante felt for Beatrice when he saw
Her passing by and own heart bowed down.

IV

In a way the novelist Nye might appreciate, it's worth at this point just briefly signposting why Nye has been read so keenly by poets for nearly sixty years. Admirable short epigrammatic poems read themselves in the earlier *Collected* which might be tracked down first: like 'November Sun', 'An Answer for the Owl', 'Catching Leaves' 'Poppies', 'John Donne and the Candle', 'One or Two Swallows', 'All Hallows', 'No Second Sight', 'The Grasshopper', 'Unlikeness', 'That Raven', and the haunting 'A Former House'. That litany suggests range too. Some poems like that last or 'Ropes' are enviably clear, furnishing a metaphoric rightness and finish. 'Listeners' written at thirteen follows a procedure Nye would try elsewhere, but this early piece is a gem to start with. Nye was horribly precocious. He knew too that his beginning prefigured his end: the title of his last quasi-*Collected* was a line from that very poem: 'The Rain and the Glass'.

Several poems like 'Poppies', 'Between', and the superb 'Divisions on a Ground' from his eponymous 1976 collection, and 'Otherwise Elsewhere', are far knottier than most others; which take on some of the toughness one associates almost with Laura Riding or mid-Graves, different to either in their warmth. This is rare in that sense, since Nye has a far greater generosity than Laura Riding whom he knew, and doesn't inhabit that pure conceptualising surface that Riding or supremely, Dickinson manage. But Nye tends to approach such states through stalking metaphors, as in such recent poems as 'The Task' with its obsessive teasing out of what fable constitutes poetry; and 'The Prize'. 'Hares Dancing' with its Herrickian rhythm and simplicity inhabits the same valedictory blessing on his world, which is what makes it so right an ending of the 1976 volume, and a disarming to the fashionable:

I will close my eyes
And see no more lies
But dance with the dancing hares.

'The Task' generates a pure narrative metaphor that most probably could never follow through without gnarling it somehow near the trees fronting the house. 'Henry James' and 'Late Victorian Sonnet' are the kind of comic poem one has simply not read for a long time, almost a lost art; like

the comic verse of Praed, Calverley, JK Stephen, Graves, Cameron, Drummond Allison for that matter.

'Margaretting' – a place dreamt of that he might invent ('And marry Margaret from Margaretting') - caresses with a lightness of touch that comes from a grace simply extinct these days. 'Raleigh Said' is a curiously powerful, more freighted condensation, prophetic of his novel on the same subject later. An eerily convincing oblique slice on the times; different to much else in his volume. 'Remembering No Name' ends beautifully too. 'Hospital Incident' again drives an incident to its inevitable heart-rending. A dying boy is brought oranges by his mother. He throws one through the window in a final despairing affirmation of his existence, eliciting protests. 'He lies face down in his blood./How's that ladies? Just once. Pardon him.' Nye's language is less ornate than most, so the details stand out. {It's poems like 'The White Fawn' that magically touch magical procedures. *Example quote needed*}.

His work becomes darker and more subtle, especially with revisions. *Darker Ends* as a volume is very much conceived as a sequence. The middle stanza is full of Jansenist self-questioning, frightening his child with shadow-play:

Why do I scare him? Fearful of my love
I'm cruelly comforted by his warm fear,
Seeing the night made perfect on the wall
In my handwriting, if illegible,
Still full of personal beasts, and terrible.

'Night Watch' is a fine successor to 'Darker Ends' with that layering of dreams-within-dreams and the mirror world of pretending not to sleep. 'Christmas Eve' follows poignantly from that, and 'A Bat in a Box' is a fluttery tour de force. The end ironically is telescoped, and one unravels it slowly. The bat's like a trapped dark heart. 'Dedications', breaks the whole mid-winter child waking sequence in a very adult manner. Recalling inscribed copies of his book to his ex-wife, he ends 'For I loved the girl who read them for their virtue/And now you have my vices and my name.' In this collection one can see the themes developed, like 'A Golden Knot' which seems a tender reprieve from the reproof of the previous poem (which does seem to be addressed to a partner). 'The Stoat' with its later spawn, 'Sign' does elicit a density of response, sexual and displaced freedoms, still there, and the neat epigrammatic set of images sharply set off in 'Signs'.

'Any Other Enemy' is elusive at first, but with Nye one finds a simpler way of reading, that the protagonist might as well have been anyone, including 'any other enemy' which includes the self as hostile (predatory I assume) although a friend; and then the twist of collaboration. 'The Same Song' transparently pursues the same *Darker Ends* as that title poem, the sensitive man wounding through fear of over-sensitiveness those he loves. Telling is the 'No, music, I've no natural explanations' since the addressee becomes something unexpected, not her, the protagonist self or the reader. Music can be sinned against and was most, here.

'Gone Out' begins with pragmatic displacement: 'Whenever you leave the house I write a poem' and then platonically concludes:

Yet when you've gone an hour the poem fades...
Which draws me out to stand and watch the way
Through the long valley, hoping you'll come back
To give my words the simple truth they lack.

Not many, recalling Wilde, could get away with that last phrase. It also pre-echoes and now resembles Seymour-Smith's masterpiece 'The Internal Saboteur'. The physicality is always more palpable and almost biblical, suggesting that tradition drawn from poets like Crashaw who Nye

admires. 'At Last' from this time in Nye's life summarises this fear-of-not-loving-truly theme that the mid-to-late 1960s seems to highlight in his work. It's quite an early maturity: Nye's recognizable sonance, his tone was something reached perhaps by 24, then pared by the kind of gift that turns in on itself, but doesn't consume its tail. Nye's development's been steadier than many, because clear from the outset. Another title of the 1969 collection, had he not written 'Darker Ends' would be 'An Absence of Nettles'. It recalls Hardy, and Graves when touched by Hardy, but only Nye could have written it. 'I like nettles, but I took /An old scythe for your sake...' ending:

But now – no flowers have come
To fit your shadows;
The earth will not accept
The seeds you sow. And who can care for
An absence of nettles, an ungrowing place?

If Nye is thought of a poet's poet, this is just and unjust; but will ensure he rides fashion and outwears it. Some poems will last, as Nye himself said generously of Derek Stanford, as long as the language. Here is another reason from this new collection:

MATCHES

Some matchsticks in a patch of melting tar
Held my attention for at least an hour
One afternoon when I was rising four.
Crouched in the shadow of some willow trees
I stared at them and saw the way love sees,
And all was close and clear and singular.

Three matchsticks in a black hot patch of tar,
One spent, one bent, one still a fusilier
Standing up proud and perpendicular
With fire in his head, my cavalier.
Well, I knelt by them on my naked knees,
Transfixed as always by simplicities.

I loved those lordlings of the molten square,
My puny masters stuck in hot black tar,
Though only now I've worked the reason out
(If love needs reasons, which of course I doubt):
We're outcast in this world, and derelict,
Matches from nothing into nowhere flicked.

John Horder has written: 'The poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy has written in the Guardian: "At his best [Robert Nye's] work wears a curious permanence." Why doesn't she recommend him to receive the Queen's Medal for Poetry?' I can only echo that, knowing Nye would laugh to the echo.

Peter Carpenter

Just Like That

Smith/Doorstop Books; pbk £9.95

Just Like That charts the development of a poet's imagination and vision over a period of twenty years. The book is a new and selected edition arranged chronologically from Peter Carpenter's first collection, *Choosing and England* (1997), to his most recent uncollected poems.

Choosing and England showed Carpenter's competence in making poems of people and places. When his second collection, *No Age*, appeared in 2001 the merely competent had become accomplished; his third collection, *The Black-out Book* (2002) confirmed his authority as a poet of people and places and as a spokesman for a society that ranges from the Second World War to the present day.

Most of his portraits are elegies in which Carpenter tells the stories of the dead in such precise detail: appearance –with or without Cromwellian warts – voice, habits and incidents that they have an afterlife outside the mind of the poet. His elegiac portraits of some of his teachers are instantly recognisable as individuals. Mr Bush in 'A Religious Education' goes quietly mad: 'It was quite simple: he'd found God/out on Epsom Downs, had a conversation with him.' Other teachers – in 'Killer', 'Specific Gravity' and 'Old Mouldy' with her 'hair-gripped grey bun,/terrible teeth, panda eyes, waiting room smell' – join Mr Bush in a gallery of flawed heroes and heroines, a gallery in which the dead become the living dead.

Carpenter's most moving portraits are of his father. In 'Stumps', 'Son', 'Cuckoo', 'Contender' and other poems the poet is also present. From the experiences in the poems and the re-creating of experience in the making of the poems, the reader can sense the shaping of Carpenter's identity as a poet and a person. We can also sense the past shaping the present.

The long poem, 'Fix', creates an interplay, an interpenetration of past and present by recreating his father's experience as a member of the crew of a Lancaster bomber on a raid over Germany and then relating these details to the poet's domestic life at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The fix that is the navigator's triangulation becomes a child's dot-to-dot game in an England at peace, a peace made possible by the bombing raids.

'Fix' leads the reader to make the connection: British bombers of the Second World War were named after towns and cities: Lancaster, Halifax, Stirling, and these were twinned with German towns and cities: Köln, Dresden, Berlin. And the connection leads Carpenter to confront one of the great problems in poetry in any age: how to make poetry out of horror.

'Returns' speaks of the holocaust that destroyed the German cities, and in the phrase, 'the great synagogue burned', Carpenter imagines the greater holocaust. The poem partly echoes the prophecy in the Old Testament Book of Hosea: 'They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.' But Carpenter's language is not Biblical. In 'Returns', 'The Facts of Life' and 'The Destruction of Dresden' he speaks in the voice, at once awed and conversational, of someone who was not an eye-witness but has assimilated the horror, transmuting it through the poetic imagination and thus making it imaginable for the reader. The horror is distanced but it not diminished. 'The Facts of Life' ends with the lines:

After this, there was no hiding place. Here were the plain,
unbelievable facts. This is what we did.

Can there be an artistry of atrocity? Carpenter's poem, 'Cuttings', shows that there is. The starting-point is 'a photograph taken just seconds prior/to the detonation' of the bomb that killed twenty-nine people in Omagh in August 1998, a photograph from which all the human figures have been blanked out so as to focus on the number plate of a car. All the people – humanity itself – are missing from the photograph and from life. They have been taken out.

There is also humour, beauty and joy in *Just Like That*. 'The League Goals of Alan J. Pinkney and other Observations' is a witty parody of T. S. Eliot; 'In Bed with Philip Larkin' plays with Larkin's statement on personas: 'I don't want to go around pretending to be me.' And there is self-deprecating humour in his portraits of himself as a schoolboy, a student and a young man.

Carpenter captures beauty in his poems of place: 'Towards Cap Gris Nez', 'Sea Stones' and 'Easterly', where he creates the poetic illusion: the poet is visited and re-visited by the place, not the place by the poet. His sense of joy is at its most intense in his poems for his children in 'A Picking', for his wife in 'Kitchen Poem' and in the perfect miniature, 'Harvest Moon'. There is a transcendental joy in the last poem in *Just Like That*, 'Two Men Contemplating the Moon':

a halo above
our heads
staring us in the face
all this time.