

FOUR CORNERS OF EARTH

DAVID H.W. GRUBB, *The Elephant in the Room* (Driftwood) £9.00

FRANCES WILSON, *Rearranging the Sky* (Rockingham) £7.95

ROBIN FORD, *Never Quite Prepared for Light* (Arrowhead) £7.50 \$.

J.G. NICHOLS, *The Paradise Construction Company* (Herla) £8.99

The keenness of David Grubb's ear for earthly distress sounds in his deft first poem, 'Falling Words', from Iris Murdoch: 'I think I am in a very bad quiet.' Grubb's poems are energetic, restless and unsettling. Trapping raw pain, they leap into myth and dream. 'The Birds of Kosovo' begins with the facts of one family's flight

whilst the soldiers shot up the chickens and the dog
and raped the blind daughter tied to the gate.

It focuses, hauntingly, on other survivors. To these, even the birds seem changed:

Were their calls human voices?
Would they soon fly down to give them news?

Grubb's technique, Protean and prolific, shifts from colloquial jokes to lines broken as Anglo-Saxon, condensed and lilting.

Telling what cannot. Listening for missing.
Voice never. Light in the leaf.
(Creative Writing Course')

Grubb displays power and range. What is missing? Terrible facts held in the dance of rhythm; time's blend of several possible subjects into one completely memorable poem. In Grubb's words, ('The Poet at a Glance'), 'This poem has not been written yet.'

Frances Wilson is a poet of corners and of oddly precise colours, with an imagination both instinctive and lovely. Her exact compassion, redeeming the tabloids' abuse of 'anoraks', catches, in her net of colour and consonants, a disruptive 'Boy on a Bicycle', absorbed in his passion for fishing.

Now, snug in his sludge-
coloured anorak, in the murk
of reed and meadowsweet,
nothing ruffles him
but the wind.

In skilled sympathy, she can expand her lines, in 'Not Darcy Bussell', into an ex-dancer's endless afternoon -- 'empty; smell of cow parsley, oil on sleepers, sweet wrappers, tar' -- then snap short at the end of a single father's hours with his daughter, 'at the door; seeing his ex- / wife's face slammed shut' ('Ex'). Her stories occasionally risk talking themselves into prose. But Frances Wilson's best poems start an ideal conversation, funny, kindly, alive:

It wasn't jealousy, that Saturday, made me faint.
It was the sun, honestly, and watching the vet
give the pigs injections.

(*'Sunstroke'*)

Robin Ford's first collection reveals a bold, surprising poet. His loudest poems cosh; his quietest startle. *'Shore Illusions'* introduces, with deceptive naivety, a child in 'curly surf' (but note the assured rhyme). Coastlines crumble, through Ford's favourite, arresting device, a completely unpunctuated trinity: 'proportion pattern shape'. Conventional, ten-syllable lines return, but confirm the poem's final shock: 'an ice-cream hut has melted into air'. Ford's surprises are radical. From a mental hospital, the repressed steady lives outside are reviewed: 'things are so strange there-' (*'Ward Social'*). He masters the music of obsession, in the brief echoing refrains (another trademark) of Gesualdo's life,

his mind
becomes a haunted tower for sixteen years
for sixteen years.

(*'Grand Guignol'*)

More calmly, Ford transplants John Clare to the Isle of Wight, together with his first love, 'or the ghost of her / blown in from sea where all waves whisper "Mary"' (*'John Clare at St Lawrence'*). The consonants' hiss, and the lingering vowels, form two of the loveliest lines I have read for a long time. This is a poet from whom we should hear more.

'Cheerfulness keeps breaking in' declares the blurb. But J.G. Nichols does not write a 'light' verse which flings all valuable baggage overboard. Honourably, these poems shoulder a good deal of baggage, including the Spenserian stanza, Dante, and several Edens.

Their editor could have rifled through more rigorously, removing some wrenching metrical shifts and word-splitting. But Nichols' courage in writing at length is amply rewarded when his patient account of his city explodes into life, as only long poems can, invoking past wickedness --

They say the vicar hollered, 'Wait for me!'
When news came of a wreck at morning prayer

-- against present destruction:

The wreckers now take Liverpool asunder
Smash Georgian terraces --

(*'One Corner of Earth'*)

Poems can salvage. Nichols catches loved detail in an alexandrine's twist and fade: 'Where strong wrought iron spirals like a wisp of smoke' (*'One Corner of Earth'*). Poems can savage. The school memoir, *'In Retrospect 1995'*, demolishes a myth, wartime's 'sense of oneness': 'The class war went on much as usual.'

J.G. Nichols' angriest work succeeds -- like the Paradise Construction Company -- by 'sheer audacity'. The audacious best from these books is memorable. Anthologists, look into their corners!

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