

Matt Merritt reviews Stav Poleg, Bobby Parker and an entertainment for W.S. Graham

Lights, Camera

Stav Poleg
Eyewear, £6

Working Class Voodoo

Bobby Parker
Offord Road Books, £10

The Caught Habits of Language

Edited by Rachael Boast, Andy Ching and
Nathan Hamilton
Donut Press, £15

There's a cinematic quality to Stav Poleg's slim collection/chunky chapbook that fully justifies the expectations created by her title. Images, impressions, perceptions and fleeting thoughts flicker constantly past the reader, with Poleg remaining constant as the still centre, observing everything that's going on. Crucially, though, she never stops questioning exactly how she, and indeed all of us, go about doing that observing, and then recording what we experience. This is the poet as both lens and filter, rather than omniscient, infallible chronicler.

Take a poem such as the superb *Leftovers*. It starts with an admission of the inadequacy of poetry, or perhaps all language, to do justice to experience:

For years I've been editing winter.
The rain, inaccurate. The sea,
acres of unwrapped water and nowhere

to find you,
even when I settled for finding you
in other people's coats
or move-about or late-night drunken
weather. Now I know enough
of winter to never
get it right.

This is poetry about writing poetry – or creating other forms of art – that never descends into self-indulgence or navel-gazing, because Poleg is concerned to show that all forms of art are about struggling to find different ways of seeing the world, and that we all do so, whether we think of ourselves as artists or not.

That passage also points up one of the stylistic features of Poleg's poetry – her use of line-breaks and enjambment. Often, as in “nowhere/ to find you...” and “drunken/ weather...” (both from the quotation above), she uses them beautifully, both to control the pace of her writing, and to set up and then confound expectations. Just once or twice, such as with “5am// train...” in the poem *Tooth*, I found myself a little baffled and my line of thought derailed, but it's a minor gripe with a collection that is otherwise sure-footed and well controlled.

Listen, You Have To Read In A Foreign Language is another stand-out, a plea to readers to trust their own instincts and allow for the possibility that not everything will make perfect sense. Its closing “But listen – don't listen/ to me. Listen to yourself. You wouldn't/ believe it” serves as something of a

“I know I am using you”, he adds later in the poem, and it is this self-awareness that is one of the most attractive aspects of Graham’s poetry, and that of many of the poets here who have followed his lead.

That aforementioned “lightstruck world”, it seems to me, is what all the poets here are attempting to recreate, and that image of illumination recurs several times, most notably in Tamar Yoseloff’s *A Letter To W.S. Graham*, which suggests:

...you’re ahead, in a lonely place (we make our own,
you said); from there you must be able to see us all,
lighting lamps with our voices.

Crucially for the book’s success, there’s plenty that isn’t obviously imitative of Graham, or paying direct tribute to him. Instead, the majority of the poems make quiet nods in the direction of the great man, often by emphasising inclusivity and inviting the reader to become a part of the creative process.

So, Emily Critchley’s *In Memory WS Graham* warns against closing off possible meanings and interpretations, as well as slipping in the sort of syntactical innovation that Graham himself might have appreciated:

...Don’t drive into that

rhyme knowing what you know:
how it will all end. The story’s not
yet straight with me & lyric I

’s become unfashionable again.

Zaffar Kunial’s playful yet utterly serious *W*nd*, on the other hand, questions the ability of language to adequately describe a sense of self, a tack taken by a number of other contributors, while Carrie Etter’s *One For London* was a favourite for me: The lines

Language, I’m going to need you
shortly, if I’m going to sustain
the moment’s teeming

seems to me to perfectly capture the adventurous, energetic spirit of so much of Graham’s poetry.

Elsewhere Vahni Capildeo’s *Seastairway* is probably the most linguistically innovative poem on show, and all the more rewarding for it, while Ian Duhig’s use of ballad-form speaks to Graham’s *The Contemporary Dear* (which precedes it), and nods to Graham’s own Irish ancestry. That there is such variety on show is one of the book’s great strengths, but it’s also testament to how Graham’s work has influenced seemingly disparate and diverse ‘schools’ of poetry – you’d be hard pressed to sort the contributors out neatly on either side of the tired old mainstream/avant-garde divide.

Other highlights, for me, come from Tony Williams, Kathryn Gray, David Briggs, Kelvin Corcoran, Charles Causley and Peter Riley, but repeat readings reveal new riches.

Finally, the anthology scores highly as a physical object. The poems are given plenty of room to breathe, and are punctuated by quotations from Graham, and black and white photos of him. As a celebration of the work and ongoing influence of one the UK’s major post-War poets, it’s hard to see how it could have been bettered.

Matt Merritt is the author of four poetry collections (most recently *The Elephant Tests*, Nine Arches Press 2013), and two natural history books. He blogs at polyolbion.blogspot.com