

Sophie Thomas reviews Padraig Regan, Anne Ryland and Dan O'Brien

Some Integrity

Padraig Regan
Carcenet Poetry, £11.99

Unruled Journal

Anne Ryland
Valley Press, £10.99

Our Cancers

Dan O'Brien
Acre Books, £13

The poems in Padraig Regan's third collection, ***Some Integrity***, read like bodies: they coalesce around organs and absences, squelch into substance, cook down to juices and thin air.

Across the collection's five numbered sections, the poems return, as if driven by appetite, to the motif of food – its preparation, deconstruction and digestion. In *Risotto*, ingredients are added one-by-one, skinned and fragile. Garlic and onion leave behind their papery shells; a lemon rind, grated, “comes away in filaments”. Regan wants us to notice the thinness of these discarded outer selves, before their transformation comes and they “become// not it/ but I”.

This mundane alchemy is never far from view. In the second section, ‘Reproductions’, we swap the kitchen for the gallery or museum, for the inside of a cabinet, in which we hunker alongside the poet, feeling the “air [grow] small” around us. There is a lovely sense in the poems here, established in the intimacy of the kitchen poems that precede it, of an ekphrastic reckoning: Old Masters are subjected to the same precise deconstruction as the spatchcocked chicken in section two. Regan digs into *Vermeer's Supper at Emmaus*, comes up with a fingernail of “lead & tin”, of “ultramarine”; in *Rembrandt's Slaughtered Ox*, they imagine how “even the wood of the panels & beams/ could tell such stories of blood/ as his anatomists won't comprehend/ for years”. In these poems, and others like them, Regan is fixated on the fleshiness of art, its materiality and construction.

These material certainties, though, do not exactly hold. The restless question at the heart of the collection is: what makes this this? The ‘Still Lives’ of its second half recall a juicier sort of Denise Levertov. In *Study of a Tomato*, a kind of ontological parlour game set in the imperative mood, the fruit's outline is “filled// with as much tomato as it can hold” – the poet's trick of an overflowing couplet mocking their own delineating agenda. While the earlier poems tend to linger in analogy, these later studies (a grapefruit, a pavlova, a pumpkin) refuse metaphor, settling instead

on intentional tautology (“this is this & only this”) or obliteration (*Three Poems after Ori Gerscht*).

The integrity at stake here is not simply structural. The prose essay filed at its centre lends a moral urgency to the questions raised elsewhere. It slips through time, beginning on the afternoon of the massacre, in a Florida nightclub, of 53 people, mostly members of Orlando’s queer community. Regan begins by contemplating windows – their impersonation of absence – and the strangeness of glass, an amorphous material that defies categorisation, being neither solid nor liquid. Somehow, although the essay remains in place – that pub, that afternoon – it also drifts, expansively and freely, between landscapes: between the pixelated Pokemon screens of Regan’s youth – site of imaginative freedom – and the streets of Belfast, scarred by decades of sectarian violence. The essay, and the poems that frame it, hold space for things unfixed, translucent and unformed. Like old glass. Or a half-cooked risotto.

Bodies, too, haunt the pages of Anne Ryland’s ***Unruled Journal***. They begin in frailty, with the image of desiccated bones staring out to sea, a skeleton inhabited by birds and air. Who the bones belong to is unclear: “a companion, or a proxy who’s been hiding” inside the poet’s own recesses? These are poems that flit between the tangible and the enigmatic, the way a body is caught between flesh and absence, the way language is, too.

In *The Finishing Work*, Ryland catalogues the family losses that resurface throughout the collection: mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles. Neat stanzas and grammatical coherence belie semantic fragmentation in a way that suggests not only the bewilderment of grief, but also, perhaps, how it might feel to leave the work of living behind you:

My father’s twin being dragged off course by a
red tanker-ship
as his hand gripped mine: could I please transfer
those four planks of wood to Barclay’s Bank?

We also encounter these family members in the letter poems interspersed throughout the collection. In acts of ventriloquy, Ryland restores her relatives from those panicked, last-gasp moments of bodies clinging to the world, detailed in *The Finishing Work*, to something more like life. In one, her mother emerges from benign well-wishes and cautious self-effacement (“an authoress should sometimes censor the I/ otherwise she might turn blobby and run out early”). An uncle takes quiet shape, composed of “Tom Thumb lettuces” and things unsaid. Here, and in the collection as a whole, Ryland stares down the barrel of generational shift, contemplates the way “one tender but firm tug” is all it takes to “unmoor” us from the relationships that have, perhaps, held us in place (*A Gentle Tug*).

In these frank and confessional poems, the “I” is certainly not censored. Ryland’s voice is generous and intimate, offering up moments of personal insight for the reader. The arrival, then, of a series of translated poems towards the middle of the collection seems, at least at first, a little incongruous. Notes make plain that these are adaptations or “versions” of the originals, rather than straightforward translations, but the reading experience remains disorienting – perhaps intentionally so. They are poems of displacement and of “strange homelands”. In one, the speaker is sent off “without course or harbour” into a land where “everything is unknown,/ everything the same”.

Ryland prepares us for these other voices by exploring what it feels like to translate, to slip between language and dialect, and how, in that linguistic alienation, to find new meaning and satisfaction in sound – in her “cabinet” of German articles (*Trauerarbeit*) or the “soft apart-taste of words in a Victorian novel” or the lovely dialect words of Northumberland that pepper this collection.

In the same spirit of sensory discovery, the final poems here spill out exuberantly across the page. Ryland takes us by the hand and pulls us, gasping, out into “May sleet and June thunder” along the

banks of the “quiet Tweed”, running “with water and mudflats, with North Sea and estuary, drawing towards the river’s source” (*Running, I become*) – all our mortal senses lit up.

A similar form of mortal touchpaper burns through Dan O’Brien’s sparse and tender ***Our Cancers***. In three-line stanzas strung in numbered sequence, he chronicles his family’s journey into the “simultaneous city” of the ill. The book follows first his wife’s, and then his own diagnosis, treatment and recovery, conveying, as O’Brien puts it, their “trajectory of trauma”. The form’s restraint, then, suggests quick gasps or flashes of pain and insight; the tentative touching of a sore spot. There is a sense, all at once, of a world suddenly reduced to its barest physical properties, and yet also of something – knowledge, experience – too big for words.

The book is split into two halves. In the first, O’Brien is caregiver and witness. It launches with aghast revelation: “Love// can you feel/ my breast O/ no O no”. But these physical moments – surgery, hair-loss, re-growth – only infrequently punctuate longer sequences of memory and dream, or nightmare. Striking but prosaic moments (“a woman// bald/ beneath her/ Missouri ballcap”) are spun into apparition or omen, in what seems to be a futile and contradictory search for explanation. So, the bald woman is incorporated into a recurring interrogation of lost or absent mothers, as the speaker seems to hurtle back to a childlike incomprehension and vulnerability: “mother/ O Mother/ Mother I// call to/ and from/ nowhere”.

The mythic voice of the first half quietens a little to usher in the second, where O’Brien confronts the stark reality of his own illness: vomit and bile, gurneys, and a catheter ripped like “a rattler/ from its den”. It surfaces in the “OxyContin/ haze” that blends so easily into the “oozing brook” of the “Otherworld” – a stygian landscape of childhood and crossings and opioid lucidity. Fragmented and glowing, the sequences here, deep in the poet’s own illness, read like High Modernism – they are verses to

sit with or return to and they give up their meaning only incrementally, like meditation or prayer.

Fizzing through this bafflement, though, is a love brought into pain-sharpened focus – through his wife’s “wild/ wide smile” or the Andalucian steps up which the couple run, newly-wed. There are angels: “a nurse who/ embraced me”; another who “hooked me/ in his tattooed arm as// I swooned”; an old woman in a waiting room who takes his hand and tells him “you will have/ long days/ on this earth”. And always: “the babe”, the couple’s daughter. In the bath, oblivious to her mother’s illness, “playing/ her body like// a drum” or sleeping on her father’s shoulder. The poet imagines a future meal with his wife and child and the collection goes out on his grown daughter’s laughter. It is a defiant reminder that the body provides our chiefest joys as well as sorrows.

Like all those who write about their own illness and suffering, O’Brien offers up the deepest recesses of his pain for the rest of us to pick over and examine. These are spare and beautiful poems to live by.

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