

# The New Poetry Of Witness

DOUGLAS HOUSTON

Alan Jenkins, *Blue Days (The Sailor's Return)*, Redstone Press,  
£10, ISBN 9781870003704;

Greg Delanty, *The New Citizen Army*, Combat Paper Press, unpriced, no ISBN;

Tim Liardet, *Priest Skear*, Shoestring Press, £6, ISBN 9781907356094

The ten poems making up Alan Jenkins's *Blue Days (The Sailor's Return)* form a tautly integrated sequence of muted, lyrical circlings of the themes of lost love, time, and place. An unnamed Mediterranean shore is the setting of the long-ended affair at the heart of the sequence and its attempts to exorcise erotic obsession:

I have come back to this place of healing,  
The blue translucent haze of sea and sky,  
In search, this time, of whatever does not die...  
Fortress, harbour wall, the village kneeling  
At the mountain's foot, in penance or in prayer

The formal poise of those lines is sustained throughout – as a strategy against the unhealed trauma of loss that returning makes acute. The sequence alternates between poems in regularly rhymed eight-line stanzas and those in a more flexible tercet form whose music is equally clear if less predictable:

Later, on your berth, she throws a plump brown arm  
Around you, you are in love, the sea is calm  
And the heart-shaped stone you found to weight

The tablecloth sits neatly in your palm.  
(When I say 'you', I am not talking straight,  
I mean someone who was I; all the rest is true.)

Sailing and the sea, "the heart-shaped stone", and the slippage between "you" and "I", are recurrent motifs in these "unreconciled, unappeasable, unfree" registrations of cancelled love and the need to move beyond it that is prevented by the stark intensity of erotic recollection in numerous poems: "You fucked with skill (*Dear heart, how like you this ?*) / And there were many moves I had to learn – / Such as the spine-tickle and the shoulder kiss..." Jenkins's Mediterranean scene-setting is given visual context by William Pownall, four of whose paintings illustrate this limited edition. Three coastal landscapes seize essentials of colour and form, and a minimalist interior is poised on the edge of abstraction. The poems have no titles – and they need none, being seamlessly continuous in engaging the paradox of emptiness and loss with so rich a sensual recollection. This is a vibrantly memorable body of work.

The thin grey board forming the covers of Greg Delanty's *The New Citizen Army* is made from the discarded uniforms of survivors of military conflicts since WWII. Drew Cameron, co-founder of the press that publishes the book, writes in his foreword that "This poetry maps

complicity within our lives in various ways. It may be our uniforms that you hold now, but in a way they are yours as well."

The poems themselves declare our complicity in the military-industrial complex's increasing power since 9/11: "the matrix beneath the surface of our daily lives being sewn / so intricately by the deity, tireless Complicity. / His temples are heated by oil secured at the expense / of slaughter." ('A Preacher on the Second Coming'). "Ares [...] has made this country his own" declares 'US', one of numerous poems that invoke the Greek pantheon in confronting the US's status quo. The poem's ending hints mordantly at the tension between Delanty's Irish origins and his subsequent status as an American citizen: "Two fighter jets on display scissor the sky's blue cloth / to shreds. They fly above our house in pastoral Vermont. / People nearby cheer. We are far from home." The undertone of lyrical affirmation in those lines is heard more clearly elsewhere in the collection. In 'The Jar of Effulgence', the nagging irritants of conscience and necessity are suddenly displaced by a visionary moment of winter daylight that annuls the shadow of "the prating Suits / stalking the hallways / of the Night House." The poem displays the force and originality of Delanty's handling of diction, cadence, and rhyme: "Now relax, / we must not let their dark / shroud our lightning-bug existence, / rob us of our modicum of pax, / our birthright spark, / the litscape heliographing, / the light within responding."

*The New Citizen Army* balances unambiguously forthright public statement with the passionate commitment to private experience that informs the poems, most notably 'Mother', which traces cancer's spread through cellular colonisation to its terminal phase. The directness with which Delanty addresses how we live, and the way he registers life's redemptively luminous moments, both make this a valuable collection.

Tim Liardet's *Priest Skear* names the raised point in Morecambe Bay where the sole survivor was rescued during the terrible incident in which twenty-three Chinese cockle-pickers were drowned in 2004. 'Riding the Velocipede' precedes the twelve-part title-sequence. A memory of sinking through "fathoms striped // with a route-map of light", when close to drowning in childhood, it sets the terms for the unflinching intensity with which the sequence enters imaginatively into the victims' last moments: "[...] there is huge inhalation // of water, not air. The whole body draws / on the heart's already taxed reserve and the pulse / slows down. The deep muscles of the neck / begin to haemorrhage, one rib, one vertebra // crack [...]"

The poems are borne on a current of humane outrage at this fatally thoughtless exploitation of migrant workers. Their deaths are recorded and mourned in imagery of such stark factuality: "They come up, like evidence, the drowned / turned greenish bronze and nibbled by crustaceans, // their clavicles rock-pools, their breast-points twirled weed // [...] In their pockets, gravel, silt and sea-lice. // And neglect, like a shifty old ghost, turned to stones / that were tied to their ankles and wrists".

After this sequence, *Priest Skear* moves on to locate the tragic loss of life in a broader context of dehumanised exploitation, one that extends to international politics. 'Stigmata' regards the trial and sentencing of the gang master chiefly responsible for the deaths. His guilt is effectively incidental to the enormity of events: "now all the blame they expect you take / x-rays right through you and finds nothing there". 'The War on Terror' is a chilling anti-elegy for Uday and Qusay Hussein, the sons of the Iraqi dictator killed by US troops in 2003, whose clear credentials as evil men only enhance their usefulness to the US's global PR machine: "Despite the misgivings of the military / Uday and Qusay are hung up with their chins on their chests / like two dead crows on the world's wire to scare the others off // [...] The tide goes in and out. One way it washes up Uday and Qusay / laid flat, the other way it lifts them to their feet."

These lines pull back to the collection's thematic centre in memorialising the lives lost to the

ungovernable power of the sea off Morecambe Bay. The last words of Guo Binlong, "Sinking water, many many sinking water", whose poor English on his mobile phone was recorded by the emergency services as the water rose over him, sound from the heart of the passion and pathos that mark Liardet's achievement.



Douglas Houston's *Beyond the Playing Fields: New and Selected Poems 1980-2010* appeared recently from Shoestring Press.