

Our Singing Language

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Ilija Jovanović, *News from the Other World: Poems in Romani*,
Francis Boutle Publishers, £9.99, ISBN 9781903427545;
Claire Crowther, *Incense*, Flarestack Poets, £4.50, ISBN 9781906480271;
Brendan Kennelly, *The Essential Brendan Kennelly: Selected Poems*,
eds. Terence Brown and Michael Longley, with CD, Bloodaxe,
£12, ISBN 9781852249045

There is no pure Romani language: there are several living, vivid, ricocheting dialects. These dialects sometimes take a loan from other tongues: language is absorbed as it is travelled through. The porosity of Romani dialects can seem to resemble the porosity of English, except for one distinction. English, for all its riches, is a language of colonisation and globalisation; Romani, for its treasures, is a language of the invisible or enslaved. The Gurbet Romani dialect, for example, is influenced linguistically by centuries of enslavement of the Roma in Romania (the group term *Gurbet* means *foreign work* or *aliens*).

The Gurbet Roma group, like the Kalderaš and Lovara, is known for independence and entrepreneurship. A number of writers have arisen from it, the most prominent being Ilija Jovanović, whose first collection of poems *Bündel/Bod o* was published in Romani (and German translation) in the year 2000. *News from the Other World: Poems in Romani* is a bilingual selected poems. It opens with the writer's memories of childhood – accounts of the casual, unconscious racism of non-gypsy "friends" – as well as a short history of Roma people. The body of the book is made up of poems about settlements, hazards of travel, identity, love, childhood and salvation. These make for strong if, at times, severe reading: dark notes abound, *duende* is evoked and Jovanović's Romani diction has fine, wry attack. Romani is phonetic, so you can listen in to his voice through reading the poems as you find them. To get the flavour of this poet, try sounding the buzz-note consonants and dammed-up internal rhymes at the close of 'Lost World':

Traden amen pe sa o them.
Amen d as thaj d as
ni d anas kaj thaj d i kaj.

(They chase us across the whole world.
We move on and on, having no idea
when this will end, or where to go.)

Jovanović calls Romani "our singing language", and like English it certainly possesses qualities that pass beyond meaning: the sound of sense, the sound of sensuality, and the sound of a group's shared sensibility. The poems collected here are capably translated by Melitta Depner. My sole criticism is that the concentration and energy of Jovanović's dialect sometimes carry abstractedly or blandly into English. The poet's attack and dark palette are what vanish in translation. To take a fairly typical example, from 'I Have No Home', the syntactical crackle, alliterative strut and resignation registered by the line-break of "Corope, bokh, maripe, mundaripe / traden ma than thaneste te d av" registers in translation as dejected prose: "Poverty, hunger and violence / drive

me from place to place". The Roma are indeed a victimised people, but do not wish to behave or sound like victims – or be ventriloquised into that role. What I am saying is that the poems work best in Romani, but you do not need to be a Romani speaker, nor a specialist in the Gurbet dialect, to get something out of this attractive and truthful book of poems. It is probably a tiny miracle it has been allowed to exist and it is a welcome addition to Romani writing in English translation.

Claire Crowther spent several years as an editor and journalist in the weight management industry. The subject of her pamphlet-length sequence *Incense* is body fat, a subject "relevant to many readers but rarely written about" sayeth The Blurb of Truth. Crowther's chosen poetic form is the, as she says "aptly named", *fatras*. The *fatras* arose in the fourteenth century France from the body of another form, the *fatrasie*, "a type of verse that exploits the unreasonable, the ridiculous and the grotesque" according to Lambert Porter's essay *La Fatrasie et le Fatras* (1960). The subjects of these old poems were surreal five centuries before Surrealism: a cheese sneezes, an onion brays, a basin chants a vigil, a flying castle sews an oven. Such medieval play demanded medieval rigour. In the *fatras*, two lines, evocative and courtly in tenor, launched the following eleven lines, furnishing the first and last lines and giving the poem its phrasal momentum and framing. Rule one for the *fatras* was to begin sharply and finish shapely; rule two insisted that reality is dreamlike. Hence this new example of the form from Claire Crowther:

*Ask a woman who's lost four stone
from side to side like a throat cut.*

Ask a women who's lost four stone
of (mostly) fat:
what is the difference?
Capacity to jump and run?

'Sure. But – as if snow melted
exposing tracks in tarmac
and the weediness of old
grass, this soaked ground –
my age has been uncovered.
Drawn mouth, a neck scored
from side to side like a throat cut.' (Untitled')

This conflation of fat and *fatras* could, at first glance, appear whimsical, even too insistently willed. My view is that the entire sequence is a minor revelation - an almost outrageously blessed ravelling of traditional form and contemporary subject. The subject is treated with truth and respect, yet the old form is given fresh tone and turn. Although Crowther follows the form's strictures to the letter, she is shrewd too, carving her own patterns. 'Let Us Now Praise Adipose Tissue' recreates the shape of "Two long chains / of fatty acids linked / by a glycerol backbone". This poem also demonstrates deeper strengths in the language chosen: Crowther uses scientific terminology to cunning poetic purpose, and she also uses that precise language accurately. Like Marianne Moore, she is able to locate the poetry asleep in the language of science, even dare I say in the language of weight management.

Brendan Kennelly is certainly an essential poet but his editors, Michael Longley and Terence Brown, have done him a favour by distilling his burgeoning oeuvre to the one hundred and ten poems in this volume, and the thirty-six poems on the accompanying CD (Kennelly is a highly

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skilled spoken word artist). This is a strong introduction to the work, and the editors are refreshingly candid about the poet's lyric and epic strengths as well – as his occasional failures of rigour (there are worse crimes than over-writing or writing too much). What comes across in *The Essential Brendan Kennelly* is the poet's spiritual generosity, a tonic sense of wonder and a project that allows new readers to reach the core of Kennelly's poetry without being tripped up by thirty slim and not-so-slim volumes.

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